Journey through Timeless India

by
Nancy Freeman Patchen

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INTRODUCTION

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My first journey to this incredible country of India was over ten years ago and it definitely had impressed me in innumerable and countless ways—right from the start. I shall never forget the scene as I emerged from the familiar comfort of the jumbo jet to descend the metal stairway to the pavement below: The contrasts and chaos were overwhelming.

The waves of heat, odors and smoke that spun around the airport were right out of a 1950's movie. The corrugated metal fence that surrounded the runways appeared to be held up with makeshift shacks of cardboard and plastic. Large red letters of an unknown alphabet were splashed across a giant billboard. Long lines of dark, skinny workers, wrapped in sooty rags, weaved back and forth between the sleek modern jets, balancing big metal bowls filled with dirt and rubble on their heads. An international airport in Bombay in 1978, but I felt catapulted back to the ancient days of pyramid building. Oh, dear, I thought, It's just as I feared; they won't have flush toilets here for sure.

The customs' officials subjected my suitcases to a thorough search. I was a little nervous because, at that time, I was carrying all sorts of contraband: chocolates, cosmetics, razors, which my friend Anjali had packed for me to carry to her family. However, the inspector did not seem to notice the candy or nail polish; he was only interested in my tampons, a three months' supply. I ended up having to open the boxes and present the contents. The inspector, dressed in his starched khaki uniform, was stumped. So I quickly extracted one from its cardboard case and rubbed it on my face like a big cotton ball. "For the ladies," I told him. "Oh, ladies," he laughed and slapped my suitcase closed. Well, what could I do, I could not be expected to give this dignified gentleman a lesson in modern feminine hygiene. Not in a place where they do not even have wheel barrows.

Hurrying out of the customs' section, I looked around for a porter to carry Anjali's heavy suitcase, not one ounce under the maximum 75-pound limit, and my smaller one. As I followed the exit arrows, I encountered a dark narrow passageway to what looked like daylight ahead. When I entered it, I was confronted by a couple of very young and short porters, dressed in what originally may have been white uniforms, but now were streaked with black grime. I hesitated, for they definitely looked too weak to lift such a load. But as it turned out, they were not porters.

They informed me that they were collecting an airport tax—ten rupees. Having just arrived, I had not yet

exchanged any money, and I assumed other people had not either. *Is the foreigner already being scammed?* Luckily, before I had time to figure out what to do, a tall, dignified woman approached me. Yes, I was Nancy and she was Mrs. Sethi, Anjali's mother. I suppose she dealt with the airport tax, or the collectors just disappeared, because the next thing I knew I was seated in a neat little beige Ambassador car. Rolling down a strip of asphalt, I was beholding my first view of the Empire named "India" by its foreign invaders.

Certainly, no one had bothered to clean up the first sights of the "crown jewel" for the sake of the tourists. After we passed what seemed like miles of squalor of makeshift shacks, we turned onto an ordinary Bombay street, lined with tiny open-air shops. When I looked down that endless blur of color, my mind reeled. Bright sun and dark shadows; luminous turquoise paint and black grease; an undulating movement of bicycles, cars, pedestrians and a couple of cows. Vignettes of another way of life whirled past me: a *sari* shop with colorful cottons waving in the breeze; a dark cubby hole filled with shelves lined with brown medicine bottles; a hole-in-the-wall with a barefoot man seated on a bench among huge woks filled with colorful sweets; a thin woman squatted on the curb peddling a huge basket of yellow bananas. Fragrant incense wafted through the air, cut by murky, musty odors from the open sewer that lined both sides of the street; aromas of food frying in large vats, interspersed with the stench of burning rubber. *Do they use old tires for fuel here?* I wonder.

I gape at dark gaps between the blocks of shops, which revealed shadowy mazes of shacks piled precariously behind the store fronts. Squashed between feeling overwhelmingly stimulated and incredibly petrified, I sit transfixed. Somehow, my mind loves the diversity, but my emotions shriek: *I am upside down on the other side of the world; what have I done to myself?*

After an hour's drive through an increasingly metropolitan environment, I sighed with relief as we turned into a quiet lane lined with tall palms and a number of four-story residential condos. Within minutes, I was sitting peacefully on a shady balcony in the middle of Bombay, enjoying a gimlet with Mr. Sethi, while Mrs. Sethi orchestrates dinner with the cook—a necessity in every household.

Although this was our first meeting, Anjali's family took me in just as if we were old friends. Educated during the years of the British Raj, their English was impeccable. They were to become like my own family as I passed through Bombay in the future. And the bathroom did have a flush toilet, and a big bathtub with claw feet that was surely left by the British. So I rested up for a week to brace myself before I boarded a train to take off across the varied landscape of this colorful, varied country.

It turns out that I loved seeing the world standing on my head. I loved being startled and confounded, and attempting to conceive of the world, and even myself, from a different point of view. Although I had come for a visit of a couple of months, I kept postponing my departure until I stayed for almost two years. During that time, I visited all the major cities, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore. However, as I traveled by train from city to city, I caught glimpses of another world; a world of rural villages and gentle folk that I consider to be the real Bharata. That's why I decided to return.

Chapter One

Arrival in an Ancient Land

I am finally returning to sacred Bharata, an ancient land whose history existed before Biblical records. I return with a prayer of thanksgiving, yet with an addendum to beseech the gods for strength to endure. The expressions of the Creator are limitless in this nation that was named and defined by its foreign invaders—from the ancient Greeks to the modern British. The inhabitants called their land Bharata after a great king of yore who ruled with divine wisdom. Bharata was the father of the people; they were his children, the *Bharatis*—the "children of light."

I plan to explore the quieter, simpler world that exists off the beaten track, a world that reveals layer after layer of times long past. Since I have traveled here before, I know to expect anything at the airport. But I am surprised, the Madras customs' official only wants to know if I am carrying video equipment. After a quick trip through the passport line, clutching my properly stamped visa, I exit through wide double doors to encounter hot, steamy, dark air hovering over a sea of brown faces. It's normally dry here, but the monsoon season has recently arrived with lots of humidity.

I have never seen so many people in an airport—especially at midnight. Maybe I have just never seen so many people, period. A friend is sending a car to pick me up, but I do not know the driver. I take a deep breath and sigh my usual *"how am I going to figure out this one out?"* Just at that moment, I am taken aback as I spot the words "NANCY PATCHEN" waving among the placards touting hotels, limos and resorts. *Hey, that's me—what a relief.* I wave as I push my way through the crowd toward the sign. The two men holding the placard quickly grab my suitcases and strap them on the roof of the car. I climb into the back seat, and off we roar into the darkness.

I sigh deeply, thankful for such a smooth entrance into my upcoming adventure. We make a quick trip down quiet, wide streets, lined with white plastered houses, surrounded by flower gardens and whitewashed walls. In contrast to other Indian cities, Madras seems sane and safe with its soft street lights and wide avenues. I smile and relax in contentment as I spot one tiny star twinkling between the gray storm clouds.

Since I have been awake for at least forty hours (I never could sleep sitting up in planes), I am relieved to find that my friend who sent the car lives south of Madras, near the airport. When we arrive at his house, he has already retired. I am glad, for I have miles to sleep before I can hope to be a social or intelligent being. But first, I step outside under the clouds and stars to say hello to this ancient land. I smile as I breathe in the air; I have many happy memories of my past travels here. Five years have passed since I resolved to return for a prolonged stay. At last I have made it. I cannot help wondering what this trip will bring. A smile spreads across my face at the unknown prospects.

As usual, I have to sleep through an entire day and night after my arrival to be able to recuperate from the twenty-four hour flight. For some reason, the planes for India always depart at midnight, so I always board the plane after a long day of hectic packing. This time I am lucky; somehow my sleeping ends one morning at 5:00 a.m., perfect timing for Indian schedules.

Since my dearest friend, Usha, lives in Pondicherry, it is the logical place for me to establish my

residency. I have never been in Pondicherry before and know very little about this former French settlement, best known for the ashram that grew around the great sage Aurobindo and The Mother, his European disciple. Although both are now deceased, they continue to have a sizable European following, so there are probably more foreigners in Pondicherry than anywhere else in India. Since all foreigners have to register in their local domicile, it should be easy dealing with the police.

So the next day, rested and eager to be settled, I take off for the tiny domain of Pondicherry, which is surrounded by the southern state of Tamil Nadu. My friend, Suddha accompanies me on the journey in order to visit a friend there. Since we are in no hurry, we take the scenic route down the east coast, the very coast that Marco Polo visited 700 years ago. Clean white sand and towering palm trees continue to dominate the scene. Only a few clusters of square cement houses sprinkled along the beach bring one into this century.

About forty-five minutes into the trip, Suddha has the driver stop the car, so we can get out to watch the sunrise as the fiery disk emerges from the endless sea. He comments how seldom it is that people in today's world have the time to witness the beautiful blessings of nature. I agree with him. Personally, I have arranged my life to include many sunsets; it has made a big difference for me. Although I do love sunrises too, I have to admit I tend to dream through them. However, it will be easier to catch them here since the warm mornings make it easier to get out of bed—especially when you know you are going to have a long lazy nap during the hot afternoon.

After passing Mahabalipuram, a quaint village with tiny ancient temples enhancing the sandy beach, we leave the coast and turn inland. Due to the scarcity of traffic, the road narrows to one lane, even though the area seems more populated. Every few miles we pass through a small village of mud huts with palm-thatched roofs. Towering palms, which give the fronds for the roofs and the coconuts for the diet, surround each village. The fronds are carefully woven, then lashed together to crown the simple mud walls with an artistic touch. Near the villages, large pipal trees spread their branches over the narrow road, providing shady footpaths for the villagers. I settle back to relish the abundance of nature's lovely lush garden floating past us. A smile radiates from my face, for I feel so content in this leafy, green tropical world. I feel home at last.

Between the villages, we see patchwork fields of green paddy. I have never seen a field laid out in perfect squares and rectangles here. The rice is planted in a maze of tiny plots—all totally asymmetrical, and of different shapes and size—outlined by curving dikes. The local villagers do not mind the traffic through their idyllic paradise; they are ready for it. They lay out their harvest of paddy on the road, in such a way that the passing vehicles thrash it as they drive over it. (By the way, rice is not rice until it is removed from the husk, until then it is paddy.) Suddha tells me that it is fortunate that it is only the beginning of the harvesting season, so there is not too much paddy on the road now. In the height of the harvest (January), the roads are covered with it, often spread so thickly that it presents a hazard since the stalks can wrap around an automobile axle.

The villagers have even put large stones along the pavement to prevent vehicles from pulling off onto the shoulder to avoid being exploited as a thrasher. The local farmers are now scattered along the highway to tend the thrashing operation: placing and rearranging the paddy, then removing the spent stalks. The women sweep up the rice grains with their short brooms, made from stems of a tall wispy grass, into wide flat baskets woven from thin strips of bamboo.

When we have to slow down to a crawl because of the thrashing operation, several of the women notice me, drop their faces in an embarrassed demeanor, then start twittering and giggling. The children are less intimidated by the unusual sight. With broad smiles and bright eyes, they wave in spontaneous glee. I love these innocent villagers who remain the backbone and the heart of India, for the population is still eighty percent rural. As I smile and wave, we speed on, past large plantations of cashew and mango trees that stretch out between the villages.



Foraging in tree for fuel and fodder

Although we left the shore of the Bay of Bengal, we still pass lots of saltwater lagoons with cranes, herons, ducks and flocks of smaller birds. The migration of the water birds from the North is reaching its peak. Everywhere I travel here the lakes, ponds and lagoons are filled to the brim with birds during the winter months—from Siberia, everyone says. It sure makes me wonder what Siberia is like in the summertime.

Around the lagoons, a cottage industry of the local folk is visible. One-foot-high dikes divide the shallow water into small sections for drying of the seawater to extract salt. When the salt dries, it is heaped into ten-foot cones, then protected from the rain with tents made of woven palm fronds.

Surely, this tropical terrain with its extravagant flowers, birds, butterflies and flowering trees is one of the things that attracts me to India. Nevertheless, you only see such sights in the mountains and in the coastal regions of the South. Much of India is desolate, somewhat like the Southwest of the U.S. Even this region can be unbearably hot. We are getting relief now due to the rainy season. The activity here is synchronized with the seasonal rains. Everyone is thankful that they have started on time to bless their winter crop. When the monsoon arrives all of nature sings—palm trees dance, flowers burst forth, naked children play, frogs croak.

Living in Ganesha's Shadow

As I sit mesmerized taking in the scenery, the two and one-half hour journey passes quickly, considering we were traveling at 40 m.p.h., or less, the entire time. I am all eyes as we enter Pondicherry. At first, it appears to be a normal Tamil Nadu town: shops, cows, bicycles, colorful plastered houses. Then we cross a river—or is it just a large sewage ditch—and enter another world: tall white-washed walls that reach right to the edge of narrow sidewalks. The French rulers of Pondicherry founded this community. At one time the French had quite a chunk of the Indian east coast. However, when they had had to fight it out with the British (both using armies of native Indians), they lost everything but a couple tiny territories, one of them was Pondicherry. The French then gave up their weapons and settled for more intellectual endeavors, creating this tiny tropical paradise in the process.

We drop the Suddha off at his friend's home. He gives the driver instructions to Usha's address: just around two corners, by the Ganesha temple. I phoned her yesterday, so she is expecting me. As we are driving slowly down the narrow crowded street right next to the temple, suddenly Usha appears, right by the roadside with a bunch of purple water lilies clutched in her hand. I have never seen her with short hair, so I have to take a second look to make sure it is really her. At that moment, she spots me in the back seat of the car and makes a flying leap toward us. I jump out of the car and we exchange long hugs with squeals of joy, a happy reunion after ten years.

She directs the driver to back around the corner where we struggle to get my suitcases out of the car. It seems that it is not the driver's duty to carry suitcases; he declines to help us. I have not tuned in to these details yet, but it must have been the Suddha's servant who loaded my suitcases this morning. And are they heavy—including reference books, portable typewriter, decent paper.

"Come. Come and look at our view," Usha runs up a staircase. I quickly give the driver a tip and follow her to the living area that is a large open space on the second floor.

"Look, if you lean just a bit, you can see the sea." Together we hang over the railing to catch the view just as a breeze starts to stir. Sure enough at the apex of two rows of white buildings is a strip of turquoise sea and the bright blue sky. The scene captivates us as we linger in silence for a moment.

"You just have time to wash up. Mary will have lunch ready for us in ten minutes."

Usha is down the steps and out the door before I even get to the bathroom. *Where is she going in such a hurry*, I wonder. My mind is taking things in slowly, slowly, but clearly, like scanning to look for a known landmark in this unknown terrain.

"Look, I haven't forgotten. Your favorite coconut water!" Usha comes rushing up the stairs, bearing the ambrosia of the tropics.

"A green coconut! Oh, how I have dreamed of green coconut water. So we have *ilanir* right here in Pondicherry?" Although coconut palms are common all over the South, some places you cannot find them for sale because everyone has them in their yards.

"Yes. You shall drink *ilanir* to your heart's content every day."

“Oh, surely, I am in heaven. With a temple at my doorstep and ambrosia to drink every day.”

Usha has a rattan dining table and chairs in the large, shady alcove. We are so busy talking that we hardly notice what we are eating. Just as well, Usha’s servant is a terrible cook. Usha apologizes and promises to cook a great dinner for me tonight. You cannot beat the enchanting setting though. Our view overlooks the decorative temple gates, which are embraced by tall swaying palms.

However, there is a test that I must pass before I enter this paradise. Aradhana (many houses have names) is being furnished to Usha by her boss, Maggie. Since housing in the cities is sparse, and often expensive, it is common for a company to furnish living quarters to its employees, but it is unusual to furnish a home to a secretary. Maggie is an influential person in Pondicherry, more precisely, in the ashram here. She held the prestigious position of secretary to The Mother, Sri Aurobindo’s famous French disciple. In addition, Maggie is a talented author in her own right. She has hired Usha as a secretary, or scribe, as she prefers to call her, to help with her current writing projects.



Usha and Mary on balcony of Aradhana

Obviously, we have to obtain Maggie’s approval for me to stay here with Usha. I am glad I have rested, for my command appointment is the very evening of my arrival. Off I go at the specified hour to tap at a little turquoise-blue door in one of the tall white walls, which is in a block owned by the Ashram. Maggie, cool and petite, answers the door in person, since her servants have already gone for the day. As I step up to the open door, I take a quick moment to take in the place. You can hardly tell where the garden ends and the house begins.

Without any social niceties, Maggie invites me, “Come on in. Let’s sit and meditate.”

I am a little surprised, but this is India—anything goes. When Maggie hands me a thin cotton pad to sit on the polished cement floor, I realize she is more Indianized than indicated by her spacious home, big bathtub and bevy of computers. I have been practicing sitting cross-legged to prepare myself for this trip because I know Indians sit on the floor a lot. Nevertheless, I practiced with a thick cushion. Here I am given a pad, not even one-quarter of an inch thick, exactly like Maggie’s. With quiet sanctity, we seat

ourselves on our little woven squares and close our eyes. We must have sat for some thirty minutes—long enough for both of my feet to fall asleep and my ankles to turn red under the stress of the hard floor. Sweetly and softly, Maggie's voice ends the session and I rearrange my legs, hoping they will rouse themselves before I have to stand.

As it turns out Maggie had an inspiration during the meditation. She has a draft of an old manuscript that she had written some years ago and had put away in a cabinet. By happenstance, she came across it just the other day. When she spotted it, she wondered if it were a sign that it was time to get it polished for publication. Since I am adept at word processing, she flashed during the meditation that I might be able to help her by typing the manuscript on to computer disk. I tell her that I will be happy to spend a couple of hours a day typing her manuscript. So I guess means I am welcome to stay at Aradhana.

In the morning, Usha and I awaken early to go for a walk by the sea. Although it's only 5:30 a.m., we find many residents lined up on the sea wall to view the sunrise. As we watch, Lord Surya spreads his rays out over the sea turning it into a shimmering, sparkling golden cape for himself. After only five minutes, the show is over and the round disk of light beams bright and hot, so we head for the shady streets.

Large trees, planted in hidden gardens behind high white walls, line the streets. My favorites are the big jasmine trees that dangle bell-shape white flowers over the sidewalks. We detect their sweet fragrance long before we can see them. Daily we pass several huge pipal trees that I come to know and love. As I stand and admire their huge branches canopying the street, I often muse: *How many birds and insects have these trees housed through the years?* One little creature after another has completed its life-cycle meandering up and down and around this maze of branches; this was the only world they ever knew.

Within a few days I settle into a regular schedule. Usha leaves for Maggie's early, so, after our morning walk, I settle in to writing and editing for a Bombay magazine. Then in the afternoon, I work a couple of hours on Maggie's manuscript. In the early evening, I take advantage of being so near Aurobindo's ashram and go over a group meditation. By the time I return, Usha is back home. She dominates in the preparation of dinner because she is such a wonderful cook. I am content to help with the chopping of vegetables and the stirring, following her instructions.

After eating, we again walk to the sea to stroll along the wall. It is a favored pastime here. The many cement benches that line sidewalk are filled with people who prefer watching the strollers instead of the waves. It seems that people-watching is more fascinating than beholding the waves—but not to us. Usha knows one grassy spot where we can sit and watch the waves roll and tumble, roll and tumble, endlessly. The waves present such a contradictory combination of peaceful and powerful crests. Little wonder they are said to represent our emotional life. Slowly, the moon creeps up over the sea. The ocean delights as it surges to scatter the moon beams; they seem to know they are sisters. The world is incredibly wonderful. I am so grateful to have time for such moments to be enfolded in its beauty.

In contrast, from our verandah, we witness the swirl of activity caused by the presence of our little neighbor, Ganesha, the deity of the temple. Daily women arrive in their colorful silk saris with gold borders, escorted by men in white cotton, dressed in their Indian compromise: a white European-style dress shirt with an Indian *dhoti* wrapped around their waists. Keshava, a real live elephant, ambles down the street collecting coins with his trunk. After he takes a coin in his snout, he reaches overhead to give it to his *mahout,* who rides on his back. Then he gives a blessing by touching his trunk on the top of the donor's head.

Keshava definitely gives me an opportunity to confront my primeval "he's bigger than me" fear. I love the way he scoops up the coin out of my hand, but the tap on the head afterwards throws me into paroxysms of anxiety. Every time, I have to challenge and chide myself to go through it. Actually, my fear is not totally unfounded. Although temple elephants everywhere greet thousands of worshippers every day without any incident, an occasional accident does occur. Recently, a famous movie star was walloped on the head by a temple elephant, one whom he considered his special pet. A week later, the actor died from the injury.

Since we are in the middle of the Tamil festival season, a solid gold chariot takes the deity out for an evening stroll through the neighborhood at least once a week. Here, as in most processions, the main idols stay at home, but stand-ins are temporarily vested with their powers. Everyone lines the road to take a blessing, while many walk along side the golden chariot. A young priest informed me that it was made in England by the Queen's craftsman some fifty years ago. From our balcony, we have a great view of the coming out of the deity to start the procession. However, the downside is the deity has a late curfew, and returns home long after we have gone to bed. Without our supervision, the tall chariot often tears down our telephone wires, even though one attendant carries a long pole with a hook to lift any sagging lines up out of the way.



Procession of Deity by temple stalls

Although small, and not particularly ornate, this temple is quite famous among the Tamilians, so it is included in all the pilgrimage tours. In addition, all the latest model cars, buses, tractors, and lorries pass the portals of the temple. Actually, the temple was specially built to accommodate them. They can drive right up and park in front of the wide entrance, so that the priest can run out to wave some flaming, smoking camphor over the hood to bless the vehicle. The trucks, buses and cars come from all over Tamil Nadu, since many drivers will not transport their first cargo or passengers until they have come to this temple to receive Ganesha's blessing. Parrots, crows, mynas, cows, goats, hawkers, beggars and lepers complete the colorful, noisy, rushing crowd. It seems as if the whole world exists right at our door step—and maybe it does.

Early one morning, when I open the door for our daily walk, I discover a beggar sleeping on the walkway, using the one step as a pillow. Upon hearing the door, he starts, takes one look at me, and bolts like he has seen a ghost. He leaves behind his worldly possession: one tin can with a couple of short dirty strings and a rubber band. I leave the can there, but he never reappears to retrieve it.

Another day, a young boy shows up on our doorstep. Although Usha attempts to talk to him in several languages, he does not utter a word. Judging from his small size, we think that he must be from the South. Even Usha cannot guess his age since many Tamils can pass for eight even when they are fifteen years of age. Our outcaste sweeper, who lives on the street corner diagonal from us, signals that she has food to give him. When he falls asleep before dark on our little patch of yard, Usha goes out and puts an old woolen shawl over him. The next morning, all we find is the crumpled shawl lying on the curb. We never see him again either.

Fortunately, Maggie is not an early starter, so Usha continues to have time for our morning walks. Once while we are walking down our street, I comment, "It's so strange. Have you noticed all these squashed *nimbus* [a type of small lime] in the street?"

"Oh, Nancy. Haven't you seen them run over the nimbus with their vehicles?"

"The cars and trucks run over the nimbus? I hadn't noticed that at all."

"Yes, that is the sacrifice. You know that these trucks and buses are dangerous to humans—especially with Indian drivers. So instead of having an accident and extracting the juice out of some poor fellow, it takes the juice out of the nimbu. When the priest burns the camphor he also gives the blessed nimbus for the vehicle to squash. So its thirst for blood is satisfied."

"Whatever works, we say.... but does it work?" I interject.

"They believe it does, so that probably helps."

"Not if they drive like idiots, as I have personally witnessed."

"You have a point, but, relatively, there are few accidents in India."

"It's true. In all my travels, I have never seen one."

By the time we return home from our morning walks, the whole area has become a turmoil of pilgrims, hawkers, beggars, lepers, lorries, buses, cows, and honking horns; all vying for their place—although no one is going anywhere in these narrow streets. This *tamaasha* (melee, but Indian-style) lasts without pause all day long. However, peace returns quickly after the temple closes at 10:00 p.m. when the big overhead lights are turned off. Since they open again at 4:00 a.m., the street people immediately settle down beneath their rags. It is our favorite time to sit out on the verandah soaking up the cool breeze that sweeps up from the sea every evening. We seldom talk; we are content to stare at the stars and soak up the silence.

But sometimes the cool dark quiet does not last. I have witnessed several scenes of the Indian drama from that verandah after midnight. One night the police arrived with night sticks and roused all the beggars and sent them packing. Uniformed officers crashed and broke all their clay cooking pots and tossed all their other belongings into a pile in the middle of the road. Hidden in the dark shadows of the verandah, I watch as everything goes up in flames.

The next morning, the beggars are all back in their places, business as usual; just as if nothing had happened. Except for our sweeper, she is in such a tizzy over the broken pot—her only cooking vessel—that Usha gives her an old aluminum pan to replace it. The sweeper is delighted to have this unbreakable and unburnable pan, so she sets to work sweeping the porch and walkway with a big smile, toothless and red, stained from the *paan* she eats. She is an hour later than usual because of the tragedy, for she usually has the small porch sparkling clean each morning before we get up.

Usha surmises that she was not born an outcaste, but was rendered one by her handicap; she is a deaf mute. Because of her handicap, an arranged marriage would have been impossible. We assume that years ago she joined the street people and married a leper. They have one daughter—delivered on the street—who has fared better than her parents. She is married, lives in a small mud hut in a nearby town, and has a darling little boy. He comes to spend a week on the sidewalk with his grandparents a couple of times a year.

When he is here, the sweeper rushes forward with the boy to get my blessing whenever I pass. I have a lot of difficulty with this Indian custom, so I divert their attention by carrying a packet of English biscuits or a piece of candy to give him. Then I pat him on the head, which passes off as a blessing. Because of him, I begin to carry candy to hand out to all the little angel-faced urchins I meet. Once a

year, our sweeper and her leper husband go to visit their daughter. They are gone only a few days, for they have the best corner at the temple and do not want to forfeit their claim. I am told that if a new beggar shows up, he is often run off by the resident beggars because they do not want to share their holdings.

A regular disturbance in the night is the pounding made by the little orange-frocked *sadhu* [hermit] smashing nuts for her *paan*. She is our only temple sadhu, a term applied to the various renunciates who wander about, living off the offerings of others. A tiny gray-haired woman, she always dresses in orange, although no one really thinks that she has taken the vows of a *sannyasi,* or renunciate, which would qualify her to wear the orange cloth. It's possible that she donned this color of the *swamis* in order to get bigger donations; it has been done before. She is quite agile and always picks her prey carefully. She heads straight for the most affluent-looking devotee. If the offering proffered is not up to her expectation, does she tell him off: long and loud. I cannot understand her Tamilian tirades, but her tone of voice tells plenty.

Many Indians, including our sweeper, are addicted to *paan:* a combination of betel leaves, areca nuts *(supari)*, calcium paste, tobacco, and various other condiments according to individual taste. The chewing of this *paan,* believed to assist digestion, has long been a tradition, for there exist many beautiful antique silver boxes to hold the various condiments. Even a poor villager will carry a metal box with little tins filled with the various fixings. The betel leaves are fresh and can be purchased at any tobacco stand. The betel leaf is spread with white calcium paste and sprinkled with the areca nut pieces. This combination makes the awful red color that you see on teeth and lips and in the streets—also in the elevators in Bombay.

Areca nuts are so hard that they have to be shaved with a knife or broken into pieces with a nut cracker, again many artistic ones exist. However, our *sadhu* uses the country method—pound them to death. Every week or so, she has a supari attack in the middle of the night. Crash, crash, crash, beats her hammer. When I just cannot take it another minute, I crawl out of bed, take my flashlight and shine it down right in her face. She takes the hint and stops.

If a bus load of pilgrims arrive in the middle of the night, our street is the best place to park to wait to be first in line when the temple opens at 4:00 a.m. They blast *bhajans* (spiritual songs) on their boom boxes, pee in the gutter, and make all sorts of racket. They never quiet down until the moment I think: it's so late, I may as well get up. Even if there are no pilgrims, one of the vendors at the temple stalls always shows up before 4:00 a.m. to get ready to sell the camphor, fresh nimbus, incense and flowers for worship. First thing, he turns up the volume on his cassette player to the highest blasting capacity. I keep threatening to run out in my night gown and teach him some English—you know, the dirty words—but at 4:00 a.m. who has the energy?

While I am taking in the parade of nightly local color, Usha is sleeping soundly. She has given up on fresh air and has closed all the shutters to her room and turned the ceiling fan up to high to drown out the noise. All Indian houses have lots of open windows, but they are equipped with solid wooden shutters to keep out the monsoon rains and the summer heat—and noise—along with iron bars to deter the beggars, robbers and especially monkeys. I eventually get so tired from sleepless nights that I have to barricade myself inside and turn on the fan too.

By coincidence, the subject for my first editing assignment for the Bombay magazine is Ganesha. Since he is our neighbor, I feel like I can get into the spirit of it. The Hindus are not really idol worshipers; their idols are symbols for a higher reality. There are many gods who represent the various aspects of the Infinite, but none is dearer to the heart of the Hindu, even the educated ones, than Ganesha. In each and every temple, both in north and south India, no matter the principal temple deity, Ganesha is worshipped first. It may be a little embarrassing to the modern-day university students that one of their gods is an elephant, actually, elephant-headed, for he does have a human body. Nevertheless, even in Bombay, students line up the day before exams to break a coconut before Ganesha. It's insurance for a good grade.

Why an elephant-faced god? Couldn't the ancient sages have foreseen that the day was coming that would produce a specimen of man whose scientific knowledge and evolutionary theories would not countenance that an animal—in whatever form—could wield power over the concerns of human beings? To comprehend it, one has to understand the Hindu theory of energy fields in the human body. The energy flow that connects these *chakras,* "wheels" of energy, is called the *kundalini,* or serpent power. The source of the energy is the first chakra in the lower pelvic region. Those who are able to see subtle energies perceive a red lotus flower with two petals and a white elephant in this lowest—but fundamental—energy center. So one could say that the elephant represents the prime mover in the individual.

There are many stories of the adventures of Ganesha in the various *Puranas* (epics). A favorite one tells of Ganesha and his brother Subramanya reaching the age of puberty. They are both steamed up to get married, but their parents present them with a challenge. The first son to circle the world will be the first to be wed. The elder Subramanya takes off in a cloud of dust, while Ganesha seems to dally for a moment. Then he calmly and reverently pays homage to his parents, none other than the illustrious deities, Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, by doing *pradakshina,* "circling" them three times. Then he meanders over to lie down under a tree for a nap. The courtiers of the royal family, even the royal couple themselves, are perplexed at this strange behavior. How can Ganesha hope to catch up with Subramanya, who, flying high on his divine swan, must be already half-way around the world? Nevertheless, Ganesha appears totally unconcerned about all the murmurs and laments.

Finally, after some time, his brother comes winging in and declares his victory. "I have arrived first," he shouts, not seeing Ganesha, still lounging in the shade of a tree.

"No, I am already here. I was first," pipes up Ganesha.

"That's impossible, you could not have beaten me," declares Subramanya; for, instead of a beautiful swan, Ganesha only has a small mouse to carry him around the world.

Then Subramanya finds out that Ganesha has never left the premises. He rants and raves, and calls for justice.

"No, no. You are mistaken," Ganesha proclaims. "Mom! Dad! Come over here and help us settle this dispute."

Fortunately, Lord Shiva had not been called out of station to do his *tandava* dance, which destroys the wicked, so he is available to arbitrate the dispute between his two sons.

"Now exactly what is the trouble?" he patiently inquires.

"Subramanya is accusing me of duplicity. He says I did not circle the world to win the race. In fact I did circle it—three times."

"But, son, you have been lying here under a tree. How can you contend that you won the race?"

"But, father, don't you recall? This very morning I worshipped you and mother with *pradakshina* three times."

"Well... Yes... You did. But what does that have to do with the race?"

"The goal of the race was to circle the world. Correct?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"You and mother are in essence the world, even the universe. Correct?"

"Yes..."

"So when I circled the both of you, I circled the entire universe. And I did it three times."

His divine father had to admit that his younger son had indeed circled the world three times and had won the race. It was not a matter of duplicity, but of cleverness.

In addition to this astuteness, aided by his brawny forehead and brain, Ganesha has become favored for his sheer strength. His ability to remove obstacles, either to material plans or spiritual goals, has put Ganesha in the place of honor by today's worshippers. Although I feel no personal connection, it is somehow a solace to know that the little solid silver Ganesha is practically at our feet—since we live on the second floor. I love to pass through the temple gates and get a glimpse of his form, shining above the crowd of worshippers who form a constant kaleidoscope of movement and color. Many times I feel that my cells are alive and singing in this strange milieu, as if I am part of a swirling, whirling colorful mandala. I feel so wonderfully comfortable with the flow of my life here in Pondicherry that I have not minded staying longer than I planned.

Chapter Three

Renewing Old Acquaintances

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After two months of simple, peaceful living, I return to Madras to attend a lecture series on Hindu philosophy by Swami Chinmayananda. Madras, the capital of Tamil Nadu, has the distinction of being the starting point of the last invasion of India—by the Europeans. The settlement and fort, established around 1640, are still in tact; St. Mary's Church is the oldest surviving British construction in India. Many made their fortunes at this trading center, including an early governor who amassed enough wealth to endow Yale University. With its European moorings, Madras has none of the architectural treasures seen throughout the rest of Tamil Nadu. Nonetheless, it is the most Indian of all the large cities, in its slower pace of life, absence of high-rise buildings, and an unpretentious populace. Situated right on the east coast, it is flanked by sandy, white beaches and wafted daily by pleasant sea breezes. The Kuvam River, which bisects the city, has been renamed the "Black Danube" by the locals, for obvious reasons.

I had met Swami Chinmayananda in San Francisco in 1975. Quite impressed with the ideas he taught from Hindu philosophy, I had decided to go to India. Actually, I specifically had the idea that I could do some volunteer work in one of the *Swami's* charitable projects. One of the most popular spiritual teachers in India, Swami Chinmayananda has declared that his mission in life is to convert Hindus to Hinduism. Since the Hindu culture was inextricably bound up with its religion, the loss of the culture—due to European influence—has put a real strain on the deeper understanding of the religion.

In 1978 when I joined the *Swami* in India, I ended up studying Hindu philosophy for four months in Sandeepany, his ashram/school outside of Bombay. Afterwards, I traveled with him from city to city for over a year. Everywhere he gave discourses to huge audiences—so big, they had to be held out-of-doors, on beaches, grassy soccer fields, or lawns in parks. Wherever he went he was invited for big feasts by the most affluent, and I tagged along. Often we ate candies embellished with gold and silver leaf; occasionally we even ate off gold plates and drank from gold goblets—
reminders of an era when Bharata supported some of the wealthiest kingdoms on the globe. Even Alexander the Great (320 BC) aspired to conquer its riches, and nearly succeeded.

Nevertheless, Bharata was not only known for her material wealth, her sages were held in high regard. They were definitely known to the ancient Greeks. Although we do not know if there was a direct communication between the two sages, Pythagoras was a contemporary of Buddha. Buddha's philosophy was in response to the degeneration into dry intellectualism of *Sankhya* philosophy, the world's oldest system of thought. Some conjecture that Pythagoras traveled to Bharata, for some of his theories appear to be influenced by Vedic thought, particularly his metaphysical theories, including transmigration. Pyrrho (c. 312 BC) definitely traveled to Bharata to gather knowledge. His skepticism is associated with the questioning nature of the philosophical section of the Vedas. Just as the European world took their "Arabic" numerals and the concept of zero from the Indian mathematicians, their philosophers also gleaned ideas for their philosophies from the Vedic seers—without giving any credits.

So Swami Chinmayananda is one of many subtle thinkers who carry on the philosophical tradition. Since my travels with him ten years ago, he has had several bouts with poor health, but I am glad to see he looks well now. The only sign of his aging is the replacement of his thick wooden sandals with soft, black scuffs. His voice and wisdom are as sharp as ever when he unfolds the brilliance of the two major founts

of Hindu philosophy: *Upanisads* and *Bhagavad Gita*. In fact, the Hindus call their philosophy Vedanta, which means “the last section of the Vedas,” comprised of some one hundred Upanisads. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a later compilation of the wisdom of the *Upanisads*, even directly quoting several of them. This last section of the Vedas was intended for the contemplative life, as opposed to the first sections that are instructive for the completion of successful activity in the world. So these are the two major divisions of the Vedas; however, there are many schools of thought within these two divisions, plus an endless variety of branches.

While studying Hindu philosophy at Sandeepany school/ashram, I had met thirty young Indian men and women who were studying the major texts of Hindu philosophy for an extended course of two and one-half years. From that group I now have many wonderful spiritual brothers and sisters. At that time I met Swami Suddhananda and Swami Paramatmananda, who are both teaching in Madras. So one day we meet for lunch at Suddha’s teaching center. Although they are both in their thirties, they are having an encouraging success teaching educated Indians, many of whom are over twice the teacher’s age. I enjoy seeing how they have matured and developed as teachers in the ten years since I have seen them. Swami Suddhananda has been going to U.S. annually for the past few years. This year he will be giving a course in a graduate school of psychology in San Diego on an interesting theme: the mind as perceived by the Hindu.

The Hindus divide what we normally call the mind into two parts: the mind *(manas)* and the intellect *(buddhi)*. The mind is considered to be the servant or file clerk of the intellect. To illustrate this role of the mind, Swami Chinmayananda tells a personal story, which he claims is true. When he was attending the university, he shared an apartment with two other young men. They pooled their resources so they could hire a servant to cook and keep things in order. The first morning the servant was on the job, one of the young men came rushing out of his room, ordering, “Quick, run me some bath water. I’m late for my class.” Just as the servant turned to follow the instructions, a second one called from his room, “Shankar, fetch me some hot tea right away.” Then the *Swami* explains, “I came out of my room, gave the boy a rupee note, and told him to go fetch me some cigarettes.” The boy stood there stunned. What could he do? He could not be three places at one time. He just quit and walked out—then and there.

The Swami goes on to explain, “So this is the way we treat our mind-servant. We think we want this, then we think we want that, then we change our mind again. How can the mind serve us and grow in dynamism if we don’t allow it? Taking the role of the director of the corporation, we must focus it on one task, assign it the action and allow it time to complete the job successfully. Afterwards, we can congratulate ourselves on the success, then move forward with another task. With this plan, you are sure to attain success in whatever endeavor you choose.”

Another point the Hindus emphasize when analyzing the mind is its dynamic nature. To illustrate this point, there is a story of a noble and wealthy monarch whose greatest desire was to understand the spiritual truths and become enlightened. One day he received the news that a famous sage was passing through his kingdom, so he sent an ambassador to bring him to the palace. After the sage had been fed and given time to rest, the king summoned the sage to his private quarters to ask him to fulfill his heart’s desire. He requested that the sage give him a *mantra,* sacred incantation, that he could repeat, so that he would be able to experience his divine nature.

The sage explained that he could give him a *mantra;* however, he could not just hand out one to just anyone. First, the seeker of wisdom had to be tested. The test was simple: the king was not to think “monkey” for ten consecutive days. So the first thing the next morning, before the king went for his bath and prayers, he thought: Now what was it I was supposed to do? “Not think monkey.” So he had thought “monkey.” Never mind, tomorrow he would remember not to think “monkey.” The next morning, the same thing occurred, so the king had to give up, for it was impossible for him to remember not to think “monkey.”

I think this concept of the mind explains Saul’s conversion to St. Paul. He was thinking about Christ more than the Christians. The Hindus have a similar case: a famous poet had been a robber who continually and regularly deprecated Lord Rama. In the end he was converted and translated the epic of

Rama's travails on earth into Prakrit, the language of the people. We have more modern examples of priests and preachers being programmed with the "no sex" idea. In concentrating on what they were supposed to avoid, it was inevitable that sex was on their mind. Therefore, the mind is for thinking and creating things; it cannot think *no-thing*.

Swami Chinmayananda is staying in the home of a long-time supporter, the Nambiar family, where he has his own personal room upstairs, which remains locked when he is not here. The house is so big that there is space for another American woman and me in an extra bedroom downstairs. The Hindus are out in their usual hordes to see the *Swami* personally. By the last couple of evenings, the crowd is so large that Mr. Nambiar cannot even get into his own home.

Frankly, I am looking forward to getting back to my quiet routine in Pondy, so one evening I opt to sit out in the yard with Mr. Nambiar away from the smash of hot bodies. I am always glad to get an opportunity to ply him with questions as he has lots of India stories. He and his brother design and build factories for extracting vegetable oils from seeds, a business started by their father, who had been a respected pillar of the Madras community.

In his youth, the elder Nambiar had left Kerala to go to far-off Delhi to attend the university. He was of the *Ksatriya*, warrior, caste, so his education was only for ornamental purposes. After earning his degree, it was understood he was to come back to live in the family home. However, it was obvious to him that the Brits were not as generous to the native aristocrats as the kings of yore had been. *Ksatriyas* did not work for wages; in fact, they did not work, except when called upon to protect the kingdom—their specific duty. Otherwise, they remained content to oversee their property, which consisted of at least one village. With the foreign government, new avenues of revenue had to be instigated. Since the duty of a military officer could be extended to include administering justice, many had entered into the British court system as minor judges. Of course, it goes without saying; these native judges could never preside in a case involving a Brit.

While, on the one hand, the British appeared to belittle India's caste system, they used it advantageously to put themselves on top. Even the lowest file clerk of European blood was above the most erudite *Brahman* scholar—in the courts, in the schools, in travel, in the clubs. I realize that the phenomenon still exists when I walk right into an exclusive private club in Bombay without a question; whereas, an Indian would never get beyond the front gate without having to prove his membership.

Although the Nambiar family's holdings were ample, the family was large, and ever expanding. Seeing the inevitable, Nambiar's father switched his course of study to engineering and, after graduation, started a company. Mr. Nambiar tells me that he feels sure his father became an outcaste in his own family for this infringement of caste rules; that is, working for pay, or worse still, owning a business. After leaving for the university, his father never returned to his family home. When he and his family went back to visit Kerala, they would only visit the wife's family home, never his. His wife is of the Nambiar caste too, but obviously from a more liberal family.

Due to Maggie's connections, I had been lucky to hitch a ride to Madras in an *ashram* car that was being sent to the airport to pick-up a friend arriving from Paris. However, I have to find a bus to take me back to Pondy. One day I stopped by the tourist information office on the main street to ask about the bus schedule to Pondicherry. They leave every hour on the hour, I was assured. So after lunch, I take off for the bus stand. When I arrive about 2:45 p.m. in plenty of time to catch the 3:00 p.m. bus, the ragged porters inform me that I would have to wait until 4:00 p.m. for the express bus. *Express bus! Why didn't the tourist office personnel tell me that there are express buses?* I opt to go on the local bus rather than wait over an hour in the Madras bus station. There is no bus station, not even a shelter; just buses parked helter-skelter on a huge, dusty parking lot, which is full of chuck holes, scattered with rocks and rubble, and perfumed with the rankest of odours. Well, what can one expect when there is no public restroom?

The local bus definitely travels the scenic route. After an hour, we leave the main highway and pass

through rural India. The terrain is not as lush as along the coast, so the villages do not look so affluent. These villagers work and eat and love as they have for centuries, untouched by the changes in emperors, viceroys, or prime ministers. As we enter every village, we encounter the village deity. In these small villages, it is often a big clay horse, standing ready for the deity to mount and ride whenever help is necessary. As in many rural areas, the locals have their own unique culture. The villagers believe that the spirits in the other world influence the affairs in this world. Therefore, the obvious thing to do is to have a benevolent—very powerful—spirit, to protect the village. The chosen one is Ayyanar, who is awake and vigilant, particularly in the dark of the night.

In this region, I am only seeing the basic red clay horses, but some villages have garishly painted ones, standing some eight feet high. Larger villages even have the mustached and armed Ayyanar seated on the steed, or standing beside it ready to mount. The quality of the rendition is not necessarily an indication of the actual affluence of the village. It is often dependent on a native son who succeeded in the city and wanted to reward the deity. Located nearby the village deity is a thatched hut where a *Brahman* priest performs a daily ritual for the welfare of the village. However, the real action takes place after the *Brahman* has gone home. On special occasions, behind a makeshift tent, an animal, usually a chicken, is sacrificed by a local sorcerer.

One of Mr. Nambiar's stories dealt with the such superstitions of the rural Tamils. He often travels out to the sites where factories for extracting oil are being constructed, in this particular case, in Tamil Nadu. Mr. Nambiar, an educated and sensible person, tells me he actually witnessed a ghost attack the plant foreman, virtually taking him down to the ground. Mr. Nambiar explains that he did not see an apparition; however, he did see the foreman being knocked about like a rubber ball. The management of the new plant took the easy way out; they inquired in the village what to do about this particular ghost. Oh, yes, the villagers acknowledged there was a ghost in the village. Their solution was simple: they put out a plate of food each night, then the ghost would not bother them. To this day, the officer sets out a plate of food each evening at the main door of this modern factory.

But that's not all. The locals are terrified of machines; machines are after blood—just like cars and buses want blood. If the machine wants blood, give it blood. So a ritual is performed in which a rooster is killed and offered to the machine spirit in place of human blood.

"No one will set foot in the factory until the ritual is completed," Mr. Nambiar assures me. "You just pay the local priest; he makes all the arrangements and performs the rituals. We just turn our heads and look the other way. But the ritual is necessary if you are going to operate a factory in Tamil Nadu. Otherwise, no one will work for you."

As we approach Pondy, we pass miles of rice fields. Just to give me a thrill, a couple of white cranes take flight as the bus passes a shimmering pond. Although the darkness of night starts to settle over the landscape, I leave the window open so I can see a little scenery and have some fresh air. The large window is arranged so that my window is shared with the seat behind me. The wind is probably blowing worse in the back because the man sitting there closes the window. Actually, there is no glass, only some type of vinyl shade, so he closes the opaque shade. When I reopen it, he complains of the cold air. Cold air indeed, it must be down to a chilly 78 degrees. Anyway, I want to see the scenery, if only by moonlight. Since the bus is three-fourths empty, I motion for him to move over to another seat. A titter of laughter passes through the bus because all eyes are on us. The man does change seats, but in a rather daunted manner with his head hanging. This is one of several incidents that will give me an insight into the male from the villages of south India.

On another occasion, I was on a bus when I politely asked a man, who was too well dressed to be an ordinary local, to put out his cigarette that was blowing smoke in my face. It was one of those rank home-style *bedis,* made from simply rolling a tobacco leaf. He ignored me with a smirk. The local men who witnessed the scene reported him to the conductor, who made him put out his *bedi* and move to the back of the bus.

The express bus trip from Madras to Pondy is a three hour ride, but, because of the circuitous scenic

route, we take almost six hours. When I tumble off the bus, I feel as if I have toured all of south India—for a price of only 12 rupees—less than one dollar. India is not as big as it seems; the slow transportation lengthens the kilometers, so that they seem like long miles. I finally arrive in Pondy at 8:30 p.m., two hours after dark. To an unwelcome surprise.

"The *swami* is here," Usha greets me with a perky tone of voice, but the dismayed look across her face tells another story.

"THE *swami?* Which *swami?*"

"You know, Nischalananda."

"He's back already. I thought the *sadhu* had wandered over to Kerala," I reply with a telling sigh. Swami Nischalananda had been in Usha's class when she studied in Swami Chinmayananda's school/ *ashram* in Bombay in 1981. After the course, Nischala spent some time in Bangalore with the Chinmaya Mission, founded to provide regular study of Vedanta in the towns and cities. After teaching there for several years, he moved to the Kailasa Ashram in Rishikesh for a period of *sadhana,* spiritual practice. He now eschews spiritual organizations, especially *swamis* who are into gathering money for *ashrams* and temples. Anyway, he says he now intends to spend his life wandering about like the "traditional *sadhus,*" sleeping peacefully under a tree, living the authentic life of a detached renunciate.

He had stayed here in Pondy for five days less than a month ago. At that time he stayed in my apartment down the street—hardly a tree. During that short visit, Usha provided all his meals at her expense. In many ways, he really was a delightful companion. He has a great sense of humor, and his contagious laughter rocked the house. Usha and I both enjoyed his company thoroughly, except he was rather critical of many other *swamis.* I do not mean to insinuate that we did not take in all the inside gossip about the holy men with open ears, but, frankly, he seemed over-critical of several that Usha and I both know and respect. We feel they are doing good social and spiritual work, so we were rather cautious of his other critiques.

However, he is set in his basic opinion: *Swamis* are renunciates and should not do any *karma,* that is, work. In spite of the common use of the word, *karma* simply means "action"; therefore, it picks up connotations associated with results from an action. When the *swami* is criticizing others he becomes a bit aggressive and animated; however, there is usually a peaceful side to his nature. Maybe we all could be at peace if we never had to work and could just walk into anyone's house to stay as long as we pleased.

Usha continues to explain, "Well, he decided to wander back to the east coast to visit Chidambaram. However, since it is Pongal, the harvest festival, he could not find a room anywhere there. He'll be here for at least another ten days."

Of course, we both know, without having to mention it, that every temple has free shelter and food for *sadhus*—but very simple fare. "Another? How long has the traditional *sadhu* who claims he simply wants to sleep under a tree been wandering here?" I query.

I am being too critical; I should give him credit. He does wander down to the beach every morning to sit on a bench and read the daily newspaper.

Usha rolls her eyes to the side room to alert me that the *swami* is in the kid's room watching TV. "Already four days chalked up," she speaks with a lowered tone. "Maggie gave him your apartment again."

"No problem. Anyway, it's really her apartment." *However, it means I won't be able to use the computer again,* I remind myself. I returned from Madras with a list of projects that I plan to accomplish. However, I can always spend the time at the library for my on-going research on an ever expanding list of intellectual projects.

My loss of the computer is a small inconvenience in comparison to the burden on Usha. Nischala is a young, modern-day *swami*. No simple fare of rice and *dal* (beans) for him, he expects his food to be cooked to order. Usha outdid herself on his previous visit and cooked every delectable dish known to her. Some of which the *swami* requested, although the ingredients were quite expensive, and the preparation was labor intensive. *So this is how the* "traditional *sadhus*" *live,* I observed sarcastically to myself more than once during that visit. Evidently Nischala does not believe his own "under a tree" press.

We hope he will not be expecting the same service this trip, for now Usha has the responsibility of taking care of a total of five children in her home. Maggie sends over a small tiffin carrier of cooked vegetables with brown bread from the ashram kitchen every evening to help with the meals, but none of the kids will eat it. This food falls into the category of left-over food, since it was cooked over an hour ago. The *swami* won't touch it. You see he is also of the priest caste, a *Brahman*; therefore, is quite particular about such things. Although technically a *swami*, being a renunciate, is supposed to leave his caste rules and duties behind when he dons the orange robe, some of the current ones do not accept the "take what comes to you unasked for" rule of the renunciate literally.

The Pongal season to celebrate the harvest is the biggest festival in Tamil Nadu, so the decorations are quite elaborate. I enjoy meandering through the lanes of the sections with Indian homes. All the window sills, the roof tops, and balustrades are lit up with tiny oil lamps made of red clay pots, with oil and a tiny cotton wick. Every morning, the young women of the household sweep and wash down the street to make a *kovalam* on the pavement. The designs seem to fall into two design categories, geometric or flowers. In either case, they will be circular, then filled in with designs. Traditionally, they were made with rice powder to feed the birds and tiny crawling creatures—the Indians simply do not object to ants, roaches, flies, like we do. Now, they just use a white chalky powder for the kovalam, which is created anew daily in front of each house and hut throughout the southern states. Since it is holiday time, they are bigger and more colorful; particularly here, since the Tamils use brightly colored chalk powder for special occasions. Obviously, since they are in front of the door or steps, they are messed up by the comings and goings during the day, disappearing for the new design that will be created tomorrow.

In all the excitement of the holiday and the additional guests, the servant woman Mary has become so useless that she has not even made the kids' beds when Usha comes home—unexpectedly—at noon one day. I am sure Mary resents the extra work, but she does have a tendency to take advantage of Usha's good nature. The only thing Mary likes is running errands. Daily she spends hours on a trip to the market for a few vegetables. It's hard to find a way I can really help Usha, but I hit on the idea that I can do the shopping at the market, so Mary will be free to do the housework. Maggie has sent one of her servants over to do the laundry; therefore, Mary should have no excuse not to finish the beds and cleaning. Nevertheless, Usha is hesitant to give me the task since she fears the vendors will take advantage of a foreigner. Finally, she agrees, but writes out a list of prices for me.

I sometimes feel that walking through a market here is like walking through the human unconscious. The market has no order, no organization, no efficiency—just one big cauldron of people, all of them totally unconcerned about accomplishing anything any time soon. Dark stalls, florescent pictures of gods, heaps of wares, tinsel garlands, stacks of burlap bags and, today, lots of mud, complete the picture. Each of the unlit stalls carries its own specialty: One has grains and dals; another may carry only rice, at least a dozen varieties, all unprocessed white. One stall will have just coconuts, another spices; one may sell such staples as sugar, flour and tea. There is always a special stall for the many varieties of coffees, at least in the South. The mind is overwhelmed, yet strangely alert, waiting to see what this unconscious whirl will bring forth next.

I finally find the vegetable section outside the pavilions. The vendors are all females, sitting on the ground with their vegetables piled in little mounds on pieces of oil cloth. I pick out the ripest tomatoes, okra, banana blossoms (still on stalk), beans, and fenugreek greens. Whatever looks freshest is our fare for the next two days, since I opt to shop only every other day. Then I search out the fruit stands in another corner of the market. I select the wonderful tropical fruits; all sweet and juicy, just like a fruit is supposed to be. Today I choose a huge papaya, guavas, custard fruit and Indian oranges; they taste like

an orange, but peel like a tangerine. Fruit vendors do take their carts through our neighborhood, but they often only have apples and bananas to cater to the European tastes. I pick up a bunch of coriander leaf, a few green chilies and a few nimbus to complete my shopping for the day.

I have no problem with communication on prices—hand signals does it all. As it turns out, I purchase everything at half the price on Usha's list. That's how we discover that Mary, in addition to taking three times as long as I did for shopping, has been charging Usha double the price for the vegetables. She was able to dupe Usha because normally vegetable prices do go up during the monsoon season due to difficulty in picking and getting trucks in and out of muddy fields.

Usha sticks with her because she says that all the servants are like this. Then one day, Mary arrives with a yellow face.

"The decision has been taken out of your hands. The maid has jaundice," I inform Usha.

"What makes you think so?"

"Her face is yellow!"

"Oh, Nancy, that's just the Tamils. They smear fresh turmeric paste on their faces. They think it lightens their skin and makes them look beautiful." So that ended the emergency.

Chapter Four

Sacred Mountain at the Center of the Earth

Since Aradhana is full of children and the *swam*i has my apartment, I decide that it is a perfect time to take off for Arunachala. This holy mountain is associated with many saints, including Ramana Maharshi in this century. Luck has it that Maggie has a special appointment, so Usha actually has one day off. We are accompanied by an attractive English woman, who makes a yearly sojourn every winter to Pondy. She and Usha will return the same day, but I plan to stay for a week as the *ashram* has a good library that I can investigate for old books.

The nearby town of Tiruvanamallai is a traditional one. When Ramana Maharshi left home to come to Arunachala Mountain in 1896, the huge temple was already ancient. This temple is dedicated to the *tejo lingam,* or the fire symbol, classifying the temple as a major pilgrimage destination, along with four other temples scattered about India that house a *lingam* (symbol) to represent the remaining four Earth elements: earth, water, air and ether. The landmark with its towering *gopuras* (entrance towers) stands at the foot of Arunachala, the mountain believed to be the abode of Lord Shiva. Regularly, visions occur to pilgrims who perceive the mountain changing into the mystical form of Lord Shiva sitting in meditation. Lacking such an experience, I have to stick with my intellectual endeavors. Even so, I have no luck in finding out any historical information about Arunachala, although plenty is known about the sage who lived here until his death in the early 1950's.

While still a teenager, Ramana Maharshi had an experience in which he realized the impermanence of the world. He actually thought that he was going to die. With his alert mind, he was able to discern that his body was going to bow out, yet he was someone different who was able to discern the coming and going of the physical body. Thus understanding that he was not the body, he then walked out of his family home without saying a word, only leaving a short note and never returned. A Hindu will tell you it was a spontaneous experience propelled by *punya,* merit, from a previous birth. I feel this explanation negates the fact that in this life Ramana was born in a family of *Brahmans* in south India. He must have heard the scriptures chanted and spiritual discussions among his father and uncles. I doubt the vision could have occurred to someone who was born in the home of a merchant who only thought of the deities when he needed help; whether it be for acquiring wealth or heirs. There is another consideration; any Hindu *pandit,* scholarly priest, will argue that Ramana's birth in a *Brahman* family was only the result of his previous incarnations. So we can conclude that he was born in a devout family where he would obtain the knowledge that would encourage the spiritual experience.



Tirunamallai Temple



Temple bathing tank

After the sixteen-year-old boy arrived in Arunachala, he sat in *samadhi*, ecstatic trance, for several years. Fortunately for spiritual seekers, he slowly began to communicate with those around him, and during several periods even appeared to lead a relatively normal life. Through the years, many pilgrims who visited him recorded their discussions. By the 1930's, he was probably the biggest attraction in south India. Many foreigners also came to interview the sage, who was known for the holy silence he radiated,

as well as his knowledge. Somerset Maugham traveled here and used Ramana as the prototype for his holy man in *The Razor's Edge,* but changed his name to Sri Ganesha. In the 1930's, Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India* put Arunachala on the map for a lot of Westerners.

Although it is located on the edge of town, the *ashram* is a world unto itself. The compound comprises a temple, meditation hall, library, large dining hall with excellent food, gardens, peacocks, and lots of guest cottages, plus a free midday meal for the local holy men. You could not believe the incredulous assortment of garbs, shapes and faces of the *sadhus* (wandering ascetics), who line up at the *ashram* entrance each day at noon under a sprawling shade tree. They come in all shapes and sizes: tall ones, short ones, fat one, skinny ones, with shaved heads, long matted hair, ashes streaked across the forehead or a spot of yellow sandalwood paste smeared between the eyebrows. Many are wrapped in an assortment of robes of white, yellow, orange or red cotton; while others are only a couple of threads from stark-naked.



Ashram gate with Arunalchala in background

The prize goes to a rather skinny young *sadhu* who has nimbus pierced by toothpicks, stuck up and down his arms. He also had a metal pick through his lips, but I did not look too closely. Little did I know that he was the only one of this type I would see in three years, or I would have checked him out closer. I never figure out where they all live; I suppose some may walk for miles for the food because I never see any of them living in the neighborhood. Anyway, they come daily with their metal pots to carry home food for the day. Their presence creates quite a spectacle.

I sit out in the sun for several hours watching the sights, for I never would have suspected that the winter sun would be too much for me. Even so, I spend my first evening in my room in bed with a terrible headache. Although the first one of this trip, these sick headaches are not uncommon when I travel. The *ashram* manager sends over a doctor who gives me a homeopathic remedy for “heat stroke.” Sounds like a sensible diagnosis to me. Who could believe it? A heat stroke in January.

The rooms are actually plain little cabins with an attached bathroom—with a flush toilet. After you bathe or wash your hands, if you hurry and run around to the back you can see the gray water flow down a little canal to a nearby tree. There are several sections of *ashram* housing, but only a few of them are located in the confines of what is actually sacred *ashram* grounds. Since I am of the female gender, my cabin is located outside the official perimeter. I am told that women are not allowed to sleep in the *ashram* proper. An interesting take on the concept that we are not the physical body.

By noon the next day, I have recovered from my headache sufficiently to take the short walk to the temple. A local *sadhu* lives nearby in a tiny house, sandwiched among other stone houses, just outside the main temple gates. When I approach the verandah, I see several young Indian men sitting with him. I hesitate, not wanting to interrupt, but they all motion for me to enter. Sure enough, Panka Baba, thus nicknamed because he always carries a *panka,* a palm fan, has his emblem by his side. He is an outrageous sight: donned in rags with rank-smelling smoke from his bedi encircling his head, flying with gray hair.

In perfect English, Panka Baba asks what I am doing here and where I am going. He seems interested in knowing what is going on in Pondy. Briefly, I describe the few public *ashram* activities I have attended.

He then tells me a bit about his own *guru,* Sri Ram Das, who is quite well known as a great enlightened sage. Even today, at his *ashram* in Kerala, there is continual chanting of Sri Ram. It is on my tentative itinerary, but I will never make it there. As we are talking, several other young men arrive to sit and listen. I feel quite positive that these young people are open to talking with the *sadhu*. Although he is certainly not traditional—I have not seen him dance in the temple courtyard yet—I feel sure he is a positive influence on them.

The next morning, I get up early, ready to do *pradakshina,* circumambulation, of the holy mountain. The winter sun rises late, so I plan to leave about 5:00 a.m. However, the call of a tropical bird awakens me earlier. I just love the sensation of hearing the call of a tropical bird announce dawn in the dark of the night. Since I am awake, I get up, dress, and am ready to go at 4:30 a.m.

Consequently, I end up walking for an hour and a half in pitch dark on an unknown route. I quickly surrender to the beauty and silence of the night. The moon set some hours ago, so the stars are diamonds, sparkling across the intense blackness of the countryside. I have always enjoyed driving at night, to soak up the star power, but I have never actually walked any distance at night. This experience is turning out to be a pleasant phenomenon. I cannot explain how contented and connected I feel, as if I were made for walking under the stars.

At the midway point, there is a small shanty where I stop for a steamy cup of hot tea. Since I am the only customer, I do not linger long. As I continue on, the sunrise begins with just a faint stripe of pink, glowing below a bank of gray clouds. A row of palm trees add their dark silhouettes across the horizon. It is the season of the morning star, so the brilliance of Venus crowns the scene. Slowly, the colors change and brighten, until finally the sun emerges from the clouds, which continue reflecting pink across the sky for at least forty-five minutes. The brilliant tones look more like a sunset than a sunrise. I vow never to miss another sunrise. Nature’s gift to us, too precious to ignore.

The journey traditionally ends with *darshan,* “beholding” of *The Deity,* at the temple. I arrive at 7:30 a. m., which is pretty good timing since I took a leisurely stroll, stopping to take in the beauty of the mountain, admire the birds, and drink tea under a ragged canvas shelter. I had really just gone on the trip as a lark to see the countryside and to see the various pilgrims participating in this tradition. In fact, I am surprised that I did not see one person on the entire journey. I expected that a lot of people would

be by-passing this Sunday stroller.

Afterwards, I feel wonderful. *This trip is surely more than a lark,* I think. The daily trip around the mountain is reputed to change one forever. One young Swiss woman, who has lived here for over ten years, swears that it changed her totally. Recently, she even took a trip back home to Switzerland for the first time since her arrival here and had a nice reunion and reconciliation with the western world. And she came back to Arunachala.

Interestingly, later when I return here, I set out the first morning for the wonderful *pradakshina* around Arunachala. Although I still enjoy walking alone in the quiet morning atmosphere, the experience is just not the same. I suppose it is because of my expectations; I had a totally innocent mind the first time. Yet, there may be another factor. I always love new experiences. Wherever I am, I am always exploring new territory. I never retrace my steps unless I just cannot avoid it. I must admit I love experiencing new things definitely more than writing about them.



Ashram Temple

After a lot of blind alleys, I find out that the sacred mountain Arunachala, which simply means “red mountain,” is considered the spiritual center of the world by the Tamils. The details are expounded in the *Skanda Purana,* which refers to Arunachala as the sacred heart of Shiva. The story goes that Brahma, the Creator, and Vishnu, the Maintainer of the creation, fell into a dispute about who was the greater deity. The ensuing chaos on the earthly realm prompted the Devas, heavenly hosts, to call on Shiva, the third member of the Hindu trinity, to request that he settle the dispute between his two associates. Whereupon Shiva manifested in the form of a towering column of light and declared,

“Whoever is able to find the upper or lower end of this column will be considered the greatest among the gods.”

Lord Vishnu took the form of a boar and began to burrow deep into the earth to find the base of the column. Whereas Lord Brahma took the form of a swan and soared to the heavens in an attempt to reach the pinnacle of the light. As Vishnu, in his boar-form, was rooting away, he fell into an altered state of consciousness in which he began to perceive the Supreme Light within himself. No longer concerned with an external column of light, he allowed himself to melt into a meditative ecstasy. On the other hand, failing to reach the top, Brahma saw a flower falling through the heavens. He caught the blossom, then returned to Shiva, declaring that he had plucked the flower from the summit.

When Vishnu floated in, still oblivious to his body, he exalted Lord Shiva, “You are the beginning and the middle and the end of everything. You are indeed everything and you illuminate everything.” Shiva announced Vishnu as the winner, whereas poor Brahma had to confess his deception.

Now this is where Arunachala comes in. Shiva realized that his manifestation as a column of light was so dazzling that it was dangerous to behold. Therefore, he manifested as the sacred mountain Arunachala; thereby explaining, “As the moon derives its light from the sun, those who worship me here at Arunachala will obtain illumination. Arunachala is ‘OM’ itself in physical form. For the sake of the devoted, I will appear on the summit of this hill every year in the form of a peace-giving beacon.”

When I return to Pondy, Swami Nischalananda is making plans for his departure. He has been asked to head an important *ashram* in Udipi, but he persists in his dispersions of spiritual organizations. He is going to Mysore, as he has another devotee there who will put him up for a while—another young woman. She is married, but she works outside the home in an office. Since he does not have her office phone number, the *swami* frets over the train schedules. He wants to calculate his trip so that he will arrive just after 5:00 p.m., so she will be home when he phones to be picked up. Having spent hours upon hours in train stations, I become slightly impatient at the hullabaloo he is causing over the fact he has to arrive at just a convenient hour.

“What difference does it make? I’ve spent lots of nights in train station waiting rooms. It’s no big deal.”

“Well, I couldn’t do anything like that,” replies the *sadhu*. While there is a tradition that a *sannyasi,* renunciate, should rest at a temple, pilgrimage shed, *Brahman’s* house or at the foot of a tree, the rules are from common practice, not from a rule book. Every *swami* who has taken the *sannyasa* vows is an individual unto himself and answers to no one. Of course, he may consult with elder *swamis,* or the one who administered his renunciation vows—if and when he pleases. Since the renunciation is for the purpose of freedom, it does make sense that freedom is impossible with someone lording it over you. After postponing his departure several times, he finally walks out the door, loaded down with his ample luggage.

“Don’t come soon,” Usha teases him in an impish voice, a variation of Tamil’s most common farewell phrase: “Come back soon.”

Just at the moment Usha knew she could not survive another day, relief comes. The kids are being sent out to “the school.” Maggie has met a young woman from Spain who wants to do some *seva,* service. So Rosa agrees to go out and attend to the children, in exchange for free room and board.

The school is a result of a long-term project that Maggie’s significant other, Nata, had started. I never inquired as to what attracted Nata, a wealthy Italian businessman, to Pondicherry for his retirement. Anyway, here he was, and he was bored. With the simple motivation of helping the poor folk in the area, he started taking bread out to the criminal village. When I first heard Usha and Maggie speaking of the “criminal village,” I thought that the inhabitants had served prison terms, therefore, were now outcastes from society. This assumption turned out to be erroneous.

From time immemorial, the populace of this particular village made their living as hired guns, so to

speak, because they only had knives. They could not afford guns. Throughout the Tamil-speaking land if anyone wanted any heinous crime committed, and had the money to pay for it, this village was where they came to make a contract. With India's modern courts of law, things have changed and these people have fallen on hard times. Nata's little project grew to include constructing a shoe factory (only outcastes will handle leather) where the villagers could work and earn a decent living. Because the majority of the workers are, and always have been, women, Nata built a school for the children of the workers.

When Nata died, Maggie took over directing the projects and seems to be doing quite an adequate job. She has even built a big home for herself and her favorite adopted daughter near the school. Now there are plans to start construction of a high school. Within ten years, the lives of these villagers have been transformed. When I visit the school, I find healthy, alert children, interested in their studies, yet happily sitting together for a silent meditation.

But there is one stone in the rice. Recently, an aggressive Communist from Kerala has come over to the village and is inciting the workers to ask for better working conditions: higher pay and shorter hours. At this time, there is a profit being made in the shoe factory, but the surplus is being turned over to the school for the children. It hardly falls under the category of capitalist exploitation. Maggie is not taking a rupee from the school for herself. She does not need to. Anyway, the whole operation is scrutinized carefully by the Government.

By coincidence, Usha and I happen to meet the culprit at an All India Youth Conference held in Pondy. The youth from the various Indian states have different languages and distinct customs, particularly wedding ceremonies, food, and often dress. Usha can tell where a woman is from by the design on her sari and by the way she wraps it. So these ten-day conferences, organized under the guidance of Vimala Thakkar, bring teenagers together in a "let's learn about each other and appreciate each other" jamboree. Vimala is a true daughter of Bharata, who I will have the privilege to meet during my sojourn.

Since both Usha and the Communist are originally from Kerala, they happen to strike up a conversation. Naturally, Usha asks her where she now lives. That's how we find out that this is the very troublemaker who is now residing in the criminal village. Of course, Usha does not reveal her connection with Maggie, but nonchalantly asks a few pertinent questions. Oh, no, the Communist asserts that she has no intention whatsoever of interfering with the villagers' lives or disturbing the factory or school there. Upon listening to this political advisor, as the Marxist calls herself, explain her business in the village, one has to conclude she is doing little more than sponging off the local folk who are now enjoying a low level of affluence because of Maggie and Nata's dedicated work.

Chapter Five

Sage of Many Facets

Indian cities do have some modern conveniences to make life comfortable, and Pondy has all of them: good restaurants, stylish clothes, beautiful fabrics, quality jewelry and crafts. Here the French and English even have their homemade brown bread, marmalade and fresh cheese, which is hard to find elsewhere, even in cities. Then we have the weekly French movie that you definitely will not find anywhere else. Yet the simple amenities of the small town are also easy to find: the bicycle rickshaws, fruit carts piled with apples and bananas—and the green coconut vendor. She already knows me by sight and picks up her machete to start whacking at the thick green husk whenever she sees me approaching. She once made a mistake though; a deep scar crosses one cheek.

No sign board indicates The Ashram's entrance. Since I am a foreigner and live close by, I end up directing people to The Ashram nearly every day. Just inside the large gates is the *ashram* headquarters with visitor information. To the right is a tiny garden with a path that curves around the large French colonial building. The first time I visited here, I was surprised to encounter a huge rectangular vault of white marble just as I turned the corner. Immediately, I felt my mind stand still. Was it the sight of this vault covered with flowers and circled by smoldering incense from end to end, or was it the atmosphere itself that radiated a heavy silence.

I now know that the vault is Sri Aurobindo's *Samadhi*, meaning "tomb," but only when it is a tomb of an enlightened sage. The body of a sage has been converted to a higher vibration and is no longer considered gross flesh. Therefore, the body is not cremated, but buried. So the *Samadhi* of Sri Aurobindo has become a shrine. The ashes of his disciple, The Mother, were also put to rest in this same crypt, as I understand it. However, no one can be sure because there was so much intrigue at the time of her death. I am still trying to collect all the details of that story.

Since I have arrived early in the day, there are only a few people around. Prompted by Usha, I hold a bouquet of roses in my hand to offer at The Samadhi. Just as I reach the marble vault to place it carefully among other the flowers, the roses were snatched out of my hand by an attendant. This act brings me back down to earth. I then note that the flowers on the four-foot-high vault are carefully arranged in beautiful designs. So they don't want anyone to mess them up, I surmise. A few devotees are bent over The Samadhi, as if saying prayers.

"Those people were saying prayers all right," Usha fills me in later.

"They go there to beg favors from The Mother.

"The Mother grants favors?"

"Well, that's what they believe. She was such a kind, generous person. To Indians, she was an authentic saint."

"And Indians go to saints to ask for things. I thought they went to the temples to ask for things, and to saints to ask for enlightenment."

"That may be the ideal, but India is a poor country nowadays. These people need help from the gods—from the saints—from anybody—to get through this modern 'civilized' life. You know what a

terrible time I have had this past year. I was lucky to find Maggie or I would be living on the street myself right now."

"I shudder at the mention of living on the filthy streets of India. "So Aradhana was a gift from the gods."

"We really don't know, but we hope so." My daily routine includes going to the Aurobindo Ashram for their evening meditation. The quiet, peaceful atmosphere I find there always pulls me back. Also, I remain aware that this is the only time I meditate every day. Somehow, some way, Aurobindo created a perceivable peace here, and somehow, some way, it still persists. Although he spent the last part of his life as a sage, in the early part of the century, Aurobindo was one of Bharata's foremost revolutionist. However, during imprisonment and the subsequent trial, fate intervened and put his life on a different track. While facing the judge and jury, Aurobindo saw the Lord Krishna superimposed on each and every one of his accusers. Even the British who imprisoned him were only Lord Krishna in form and essence.

The realization was a major turning point for him; he could no longer fight these oppressors as the enemy. He was able to take asylum in the French territory of Pondicherry. Up until that time he had lived a traditional Indian life, educated in England, then marrying to live a householder's life. Because of his activities, his wife spent a lot of time in her own family's home, which was quite common for young brides in those days. However, she was going to join him after he fled to Pondicherry. Strangely, she took ill and died en route.

I continue to spend at least an hour a day typing Maggie's novel. The story is an interesting look into an aspect of Sri Aurobindo that normally is unknown. It turns out that during World War II Sri Aurobindo was making a concerted effort—psychically—to assist the Allies on the European war front. Evidently, both he and The Mother made contact with a certain American soldier, whom I will call Larry. For some reason, Larry had an unusual sensitivity that enabled him to see huge images of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother spread across the sky. When Larry asked his fellow soldiers if they could see anything strange in the sky, they reported that they could only see wisps of beautifully colored clouds. These images continued to be a source of inspiration to Larry to carry him through the grim circumstances of a series of war experiences, which are described in Maggie's novel. On one occasion, Sri Aurobindo actually saved his life, when Larry heard his voice warning him not to go near a box car. A few moments later the car exploded.

Interesting story, however, I find the story of how Larry found out the identity of the heavenly apparitions even more intriguing. Larry had intended to marry his sweetheart when he returned from Europe. Like so many soldiers returning from war, he became disenchanted with the life of material pursuits; more so, because he was haunted by the memories of the wonderful, saintly images. For all he knew, they were heavenly angels.

Then one day he happened to be in a large library. As he was walking down an aisle, a book fell out on the floor right at his feet. He stooped to pick it up, and unconsciously flipped through the pages. There on the frontispiece was a photo of Sri Aurobindo, his heavenly guide. Needless to say, he was overwhelmed. So much so that from that moment, his whole life centered on plans to travel to India to meet the saint. Tying up all loose ends of his personal life, he even broke his engagement. He then spent all of his time and energy doing whatever odd jobs he could find in order to save money for the passage to India. As wretched fate would have it, by the time he arrived here in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo was already dead. However, The Mother was still alive and well.

By that time, The Mother was probably more like a Queen than a mother. You had to have an appointment for an audience with her. Still, there were certain days at a specific hour that she appeared on her balcony to bestow her blessings on everyone. We can assume that Larry joined the crowd at all those opportunities for glimpses of her, for Maggie says he did become rather enamored of The Mother. I would even assume that after finding out who Sri Aurobindo and The Mother were, Larry may have even entertained the idea that he was someone special. He must have conjectured that the random falling of a book at his feet was a sign, an omen, of some great plan of which he was a part. Strangely, the story does not end so well.

For some reason, The Mother just did not take to Larry at their first meeting; then she seemed to avoid additional audiences with him. She would give him no confirmation that he had been specifically picked by Sri Aurobindo, or if she thought he had just been hallucinating. In short, she did not want to talk about any war experiences.

He did get attention from the residents of The Ashram, however, as he recounted his stories of seeing the giant saint and great lady hovering in the sky, giving him solace in the dirty, damp, cold trenches of Europe. Since this novel is a firsthand report as Larry related the events to her, Maggie obviously gave him some consideration. Perhaps, if the book had been completed and published at that time, it could have bolstered his spirits. As his personal plot unfolded, he turned to the bottle and died a drunkard's death right here in Pondicherry.

It is intriguing getting to know Larry, day by day, as I tap out his war story on computer keys. Then I hear that the *ashram* management is arranging a program telling about Aurobindo's war efforts. Maybe Maggie heard of the plan and that is why she pulled out this old manuscript. It would not be the other way around. Whereas everyone loves and admires Maggie, the *ashram* management is not exactly excited about having her around. Having been The Mother's personal secretary in those last days, she knows too much.

It's hard for me to imagine just what the *ashram* was like back in those days. The Mother must have had some special powers, and I certainly have no problem with anyone using special powers to help others in any way whatsoever. Even though the philosophical path of Hinduism eschews such phenomena as dangerous because these powers can pull one down, I know in my heart that, if I had any special powers, I would want to help others. Admittedly, a problem with power and control can arise because the devotees may be waiting to be granted a favor, so they are afraid to speak up to question the master's behavior. Some stories indicate that The Mother stepped over the line at times. Sometimes she was quite a tyrant, for example, to her handmaidens over such simple things as dressing her in the mornings.

The Mother was born into a wealthy family in France, of Egyptian and Turkish parents. Even at an early age, she had psychic experiences, such as visitations from saints and even mystical trances. However, she put that part of herself aside, married and had children. Interestingly, it was her husband who told her of the saint of Pondicherry, whom he had met on a business trip to French India. So she accompanied her husband on his next trip. When she saw the great saint, she was totally and hopelessly enamored. I think she made a couple of trips back to France, but came here to live as soon as she could arrange it. It was as if she suddenly came to her senses when she beheld in Aurobindo a reflection of her mystical, spiritual self.

Slowly, I begin learning some details about Sri Aurobindo, an incredible intellect. Everyone here has a set of the big volumes of all his writings, but few understand them. Most have not even made an attempt to read them. That seems to be the reason most *ashram* residents have moved their allegiance to The Mother. She was more down to earth. Well, even that statement must be qualified. She was down to earth in establishing the *ashram*, the school with its innovative curriculum, and the industries to make the beautiful handicrafts she loved. Nevertheless, there was nothing practical about her "teachings."

Her memoirs, recorded by a European, given the Indian name of Sat Prem, often read like science fiction in inner space. Using the excuse that they were written by a European, they are not sanctioned by the *ashram* powers that be. Although Hinduism has its flexibility, I think the Mother probably exceeded the stretch test, not for the actual content, but for the flights of fantasy. Therefore, you will not find them in the ashram library or book shop. Actually, they are more difficult to comprehend than Aurobindo, so the censorship may be unnecessary.

After my daily trip to the library, I usually walk over to The Ashram to sit and meditate in The Mother's *samadhi* room. When Aurobindo died of kidney failure, the burden fell upon her to test their immortality theory. No one thought she was going to die. When she appeared to have "left the body," they put her in this room to watch over her to be sure she was not in a mystical trance.

Coincidentally, the first I knew of any intrigue surrounding The Mother's death was years ago in 1978 when I met a young man from Europe when I was visiting near Dharmasala with Swami Chinmayananda. It was during my first trip to India, so I am sure I had not even heard of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother at that time. This young man had been at the Pondicherry Ashram for fifteen years and had come to the Himalayas to take a retreat from the heat. He told me that The Mother had believed herself to be immortal. In her last years, she was always looking in the mirror, remarking how she was getting younger every day. No one dared to cross her and tell her the simple truth: She was an old woman and she looked it. She was also getting more and more cantankerous every day. During this period no one was allowed to see her except a couple of the *ashram* trustees; not even Maggie, her secretary, and Sat Prem, her scribe, saw her.

The event of the season is the performance of *Savitri* by the *ashram* residents. The theater, a covered amphitheater at the other end of the beach, is usually empty. This evening is the only time I ever saw the heavy gates unlocked. Everyone from the *ashram* is present. Although the play is free, it is not first come, first served; you have to have an *ashram* pass to get a decent seat. Of course, Maggie arranged passes for Usha and me.

The history of the Savitri is taken from the *Mahabharata* epic. Due to her devotion and wisdom, Savitri was able to save her husband from Lord Death. Therefore, she has a place of honor in the hearts of all Indian women. Every young girl knows the story of Savitri. In a subtle way—
Westerners can never perceive—the Hindu culture has always idolized woman.

However, Aurobindo was more interested in the theme of immortality than wifely devotion, so he converted the story into a lengthy poem highlighting his ideas on the possibility of human immortality. The drama is spoken in Bengali, the native language of Aurobindo. Since I already know the essential story, I am able to follow along. The director has gone all out for the costumes and lighting effects, so it is visually pleasing.

Here is the jest of the story: The elderly king and queen of Madra remained childless. As was common in those ancient days, when anyone had a problem, the couple went to the forest to live an ascetic life and pray to the Goddess Savitri for a child. After EIGHTEEN YEARS, the Goddess appeared and granted them the boon they requested. They returned to the palace for the delivery of a daughter, named for the Goddess herself. Although Savitri was an unusually beautiful maiden, she received no proposals for marriage from princes of the surrounding kingdoms. Her father told her to go out and find a suitable spouse for herself. (Yes, princesses chose their own husbands in the ancient days. However, the common practice was to call the princes to a big *durbar,* so she could take her pick.)

In her travels, Savitri came upon a royal family, who were living in the forest. The honorable regent had been disposed in a court intrigue. The blind king and his elderly wife were being served by their young handsome son, Satyavan. It was love at first sight between the prince and princess.

Both of their families agreed that Satyavan and Savitri would make a most handsome royal couple. But wait, there is a twist. The heavenly messenger, Narada, happened to be visiting Savitri's parents at the time. He affirms that Satyavan was a most honorable mate, but, unfortunately, he was destined to die in exactly one year. Savitri's parents were quite distraught and suggested she make another selection. In spite of the forecast, Savitri's heart was set; the marriage ceremony was performed.

Savitri gave up her royal robes to go to the woods to live with her in-laws where she lived happily for 356 days (the Hindu year has 360 days). As the date of the impending death of her husband approached, she made her plans. As any Hindu woman would do for the sake of her family, she fasted for three days. At the end of the year, on the 360th morning, when Satyavan left for his daily routine of chopping wood in the forest, Savitri followed although she still had not eaten a bite of food. Satyavan questioned her behavior, for she had never gone with him before. Even his parents expressed their concern, but finally gave their permission. She was a determined woman.

First, the young couple gathered some fruits and roots for dinner. Then when Satyavan started to chop wood, he was overcome with exhaustion and practically slumped to the ground. Savitri caught him just

in time to place his head comfortably in her lap. When she looked up, sure enough, there came Lord Death, decked out in his blood stained robes with a noose dangling from his shoulder. Savitri tried to delay Yama (the Controller), but he was not dissuaded from his task. He quickly looped his noose onto the soul of Satyavan and headed south, leaving Savitri with a lifeless carcass on her lap. Carefully she set it aside, then followed after DharmaRaja. [Lord Death has many names: Kala = Time; Yama = Controller; DharmaRaja = King of Duty or Righteousness.]

"Go back. You can't go where I'm going," Yama admonishes her.

"I must follow, for it is a wife's duty to go wherever her husband goes. I have just fasted for his sake. Besides I have earned the merit of having lived a life of love and devotion to my elderly parents; plus another one year of credit is due me for serving my husband's parents." DharmaRaja must acknowledge this righteous young woman; the king of righteousness is obligated to play by the rules. "I'll grant you one boon, but you must stop now."

"I request that my father-in-law's eyesight be restored."

"Let it be so," Lord Death avowed.

However, Savitri is not dissuaded; she continues to follow them. He finally relents, "Okay, you may have another boon, but you must return. You cannot go where we are going."

"I request that my father-in-law's kingdom be restored to him."

"Let it be so."

When she still continues to follow him, DharmaRaja becomes stressed. "Okay, one last boon, but this is it," he barks.

In a composed tone, Savitri enumerates her last request: "May there be 100 heirs born to my father-in-law's throne."

"Granted," Lord Death retorts, thinking that he is rid of her.

When Savitri continues to follow him, the ancient fellow losses his patience: "You are such a worthy person that I am duty-bound to protect you, but you must turn back. You cannot go any farther."

"But sir. You told me that my father-in-law's lineage is to be continued. Satyavan is their only son. They are too old to have children; therefore, their lineage has to continue through him."

So Savitri saved her husband from the clutches of Lord Death. They lived a long, happy life thereafter.

Savitri's devotion to her spouse was such that she was able to outwit humanity's ultimate adversary. Aurobindo used this story to emphasize his belief in physical immortality. Since Satyavan defied death, Aurobindo calls him immortal; therefore, his lifelong interest in Savitri.

In the event, The Immortal Mother died. She had given specific orders to her devotees: If she were to die, the body should be laid out very carefully without any human touching it. She would return to the body in three days. Needless to say, her instructions were followed with the utmost of care. The European in Dharmasala reported to me that the body started decaying before the three days were completed. Unholy smells that were obvious to everyone, including himself, were wafting from the corpse. This is the tropics; flesh spoils fast here. The British always said that is the reason the Hindus cremate their dead immediately. It's not the real reason, but it's certainly a valid one. Wisely, one of the *ashram* trustees took it upon himself to take the body out and get it cremated.

That was the story, as told to me in 1978 by a first-hand witness, but you will not hear that story anywhere about the *ashram* now. The story now is a demon of a man took The Mother out to be buried before the three days were up. It was for that reason only The Mother did not resurrect. The same man

became involved in the battle to win Auroville as The Ashram's property; he lost that battle too.

So there is no one left to tell the truth except Sat Prem, The Mother's personal scribe. He has told the story—in print. In her last days, he was not allowed to see her, but he tried to keep a line on what was happening. He found out much later that the male trustees were giving her a sedative to quell her hysterical outbursts. To Sat Prem that meant that the drug could have interfered with the natural transmutation process she was going through to achieve immortality.

The *ashram* powers-that-be disposed of Sat Prem too, burned his hut, and ran him out of Pondicherry. Some say they even got his visa revoked, so he had to leave India. In the meantime, he has grown old, but his writing is fresh and wonderfully innocent. Perhaps, he will be the one who remains forever young. I heard that he is back in India, staying somewhere in the Nilgiris, but the exact location is top secret.

Maggie knows many details of The Mother's death—so much that she is ostracized from the inner circle of the *ashram*. However, she never rocks any boats and remains busy with her writing and social service projects, obviously content not to be wasting her time with *ashram* intrigues. Since she was not allowed to see The Mother either, she really has no first-hand information of those last days.

With the kids back in school, Usha and I are alone again and able to return to the serenity at Aradhana. What more could one ask for? Well, maybe a 80 degree day. Rarely are our conversations on everyday concerns. She too is open and seeking some answers about how we divine beings have become so muddled in *samsara,* the mundane reality.

One evening I ask her, "Aurobindo was really doing his own thing, this supramental plane business. Is he considered a Hindu?"

"Of course, he's a Hindu. He did develop his own system of thought, but he also wrote wonderful commentaries on the major Upanisads and on the *Bhagavad Gita* too."

"Readable?"

"Probably not. At least I have not been able to get through his book that I am now trying to read on yoga. They say that you don't have to understand his words, that just reading them puts you into another state of consciousness."

"Well, that was true for me. The other night I picked up that book on yoga, it put me right to sleep before I finished the third page," I laugh. In Hindu thought, there are four states of consciousness: waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep; plus the underlying *turiya*, fourth, state, which can be described as the screen on which the other three play out their dramas.

"I wonder how he saw the world. I know nothing about him, but I read once about an incident when he had an unique experience. Yes, I remember now; he did have a Hindu *guru.* His *guru* made Aurobindo sit alone in a room until he understood the nature of thought. After three days, Aurobindo perceived that the source of thought is not internal, that thoughts actually come into the mind from an external source, like arrows. It's a matter of like attracts like. The idea sure gives we proponents of free will a shutter. If it is true, it pushes Western thought back to the starting point."

"He did have a different view of the world. I guess that's why he sat up there in that room for twenty-five years—trying to explain his concepts," Usha replies to my rambling.

"You don't mean that he literally stayed in that one place for twenty-five years?"

"I mean he never left that small apartment..."

"Not even to walk down the stairs to the garden for a little exercise and fresh air?"

"Well, I can't say. You have to realize that the *ashram* has been built around the rooms he stayed in. It

wasn't like this when he was alive."

I am aghast. "You are telling me that the sage, whose main premise was *karma yoga,* liberation through action in the world, and who initiated the building of a huge *ashram* around himself, sat in two small rooms for twenty-five years. On the other hand, Adi Sankaracharya, the great teacher whose main teaching was the doctrine of non-action, traveled around India by foot three times, debating all the religious leaders and revitalizing all the old temples. How in the world are we Westerners ever to understand the Hindus?"

"You certainly never will if you want to nail everything down to one rule, chiseled in stone. Nancy, there are many realms of experience available to humans. You know that, or you wouldn't be here. In Hinduism there is room for one and all. A huge bouquet of many-colored experiences comes from the Divine—how can one experience be more valid, more important, more valuable, than another?"

"Living in a world where one has eat to live, and work to eat, a world that is dominated by businessmen seeking profits for themselves only, I tend to forget that simple fact."

"You certainly have a point there. That's why the Indians are running after money instead of living the simple, traditional life of our ancestors. And I'm not talking about ages ago, I'm talking about even fifty years back. Everything is so different now. Look at me; I can't live on philosophy. I'm having to work ten hours a day, seven days a week, for a roof over my head and food to eat. Don't ask me how you live a spiritual life in today's world. I sure don't have it figured out."

I guess trying to figure out this dilemma is one of the reasons I am in India. I am aware that a part of me really wants to have a basic simple life, yet I truly do not know for how long I would remain satisfied without certain luxuries that I enjoy. I have noticed that somehow when I am the most peaceful, the material things do not seem to matter. It makes me wonder if my need to have more things is simply relative to my state of mind.

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Chapter Six

NataRaja, The Dancing Deity

Since I am so close to Chidambaram, I take the opportunity to travel to the temple there. Dating from around 950 AD, Chidambaram is one of the ancient *Brahman* villages: No kings, no lay people, just priests doing their priestly duties for the welfare of the ruler and the populace. These temple villages often have many small temples, but here in Chidambaram there is only one awesome abode for the Deities. To be technically correct, there is another small temple on the edge of town that houses the Goddess.

A European author called the temple dilapidated in 1963, and things have not improved. He also said the temple walls encompassed 40 acres, which may be an exaggeration. Anyway, the compound is huge. The roads, except for the circuit around the temple, are frightfully narrow. As there are no sidewalks, I feel as if I am risking my life every time step into the street. It is the usual Indian crowd—bicycles, cows, people, goats, and a few stray chuckholes—all harmless enough, if it weren't for the numerous lorries and buses, which always appear to be in a rush to make up for lost time.

Although the town is shabby and the temple rather unkempt, many details of the temple are phenomenal. I enter through the east gate, enhanced by a *gopura* [entrance tower] over one hundred feet tall. Stone carvings of the 108 possible poses of the traditional *Bharat Natyam* dance of south India cover a wide expanse of the hallway of the tower itself. After crossing a large patio, I enter a large hallway with carved stone pillars; actually, there are several such halls, each with its own unique decorative carving. In the center of the complex stands the main *sanctum sanctorum*. This is the only place in India where it is possible to behold all three deities of the Hindu trinity at one time: Shiva, as the cosmic dancer NataRaja; Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, in charge of preservation of the creation. The Vishnu temple is quite large and part of a large temple platform. In his traditional repose, Vishnu faces east as he slumbers, lost in his cosmic dream—guess what he is dreaming. You are right: the creation. We—with all our traumas and dramas—are Vishnu's dream. Poor Vishnu.

The Nataraja temple is large and ornate. Shiva's temple is always entered from the South; that is, Shiva faces south, even in his dancing mode. Both chapels are covered with solid gold tiles—they are necessary to create a conducive energy field, I am told. There are actually two *sanctum sanctorums* under Shiva's golden pavilion; one housing Nataraja while the other is the seat of the *akaasha lingam*, or the element of ether. So the usual place for a deity is indeed empty. The Hindus not only worship idols, they worship empty space! In the truest sense, they worship everything.

Beside Shiva's temple sits the tiny shrine of Brahma. Only a couple of temples for the Creator Deity exist in India. Here, no one is particularly interested in the Creator, for the creation has already happened; the challenge is what to do now. It's a matter of how to get on with life and take advantage of the creation, which is Vishnu's domain; or how to get out of the whole mess, Shiva's function. In a separate temple, Shiva's consort, Parvati, has her own quarters, particularly distinctive for the lovely scenic paintings on the ceiling, all in natural colors.

I am fortunate that I am here on a Thursday, the morning of the special ritual for the ruby *NataRaja lingam*. Shiva as Lord of the Dance has its origins from a story in which Shiva sought to cure the arrogance of some sages living in the Taraka forest. The seers were feeling proud of their spiritual attainments, while their wives were equally arrogant because of their chaste deportment. Through their austerities, the sages had garnered enough power to defy the gods.

One sure thing about gods—they do not like to be defied— it is a common thread through all religions. So Vishnu and Shiva set out to resolve the threat. Appearing as a charming young lass, Vishnu ran through the forest in a captivating manner. He was followed by Shiva, who appeared to be a young man. In an elaborately sensual scenario, the young man caught the damsel and started putting the moves on her—something that Shiva had lots of practice with since his wives tended to be demanding. The celibate sages lost it totally and were caught up in the passion of the moment, totally forgetting their spiritual austerities. Likewise, their wives forgot their virtues when they beheld the alluring young man.

When the sages realized how they had been duped, they performed a grand ritual to conjure a serpent, a tiger, a fire, and a demon to punish Shiva. Undaunted, Shiva took on the challenge of the adversaries and conquered them all. Thereafter, he wrapped the serpent around his neck as an ornament, the tiger's skin became his underwear; he brandished the fire as a weapon, then danced in ecstasy over the demon. The place of his dance is Chidambaram, the center of the universe that exists everyone's heart.

Of course, I plan to attend the special ritual for the dancing NataRaja. However, I am informed by my guide that I have to pay 100 *rupees* for a ticket to witness the ritual of the ruby *lingam*. I had already paid him 50 *rupees* for a tour of the temple. Expensive, when you consider it was more than the price of my room. However, I was not disappointed; the guide told me a lot of interesting information that made the trip worthwhile. So I tell him that I will think about buying the ticket, then I stroll off to question the priests if a ticket is necessary. "No, of course, not. Not here."

The *lingam*, object of worship, is brought out enshrouded in a dark cloth. When it is uncovered, offerings such as sandalwood paste and milk are poured over it. Try as I may, I just cannot seem to lose my Western mind. I can hardly keep my attention on the ceremony for watching the Indians rush up to get a drink of the milk that runs off the *lingam,* then flows through a stone conduit down to where we are standing. Surely, the grace of the Lord will cancel any affect of the black and green moss I spot lining the gray stone spout. My mind cannot accept the reality and keeps repeating, what India needs is some good bacteriologists. The ceremony ends with a flourish as the priest lights a large lamp and passes it around the lingam so that the translucent ruby of the NataRaja image glows in all its glory.

By the way, the demon on which NataRaja dances is the dwarf of ignorance, our forgetting of our divine nature. Shiva is trying to keep it under control, so we can get a glimpse of our divinity; however, some Western intellects say that he is grinding down his wife. Hardly, he is the only deity who spends months at a time off-duty, while he caters to his wife's needs, mostly intimate duties.

Another advantage of having a guide is that he introduced me to one of the Dikshithar Brahmans who speaks English and is actually doing some writing about the Hindu traditions. As always with Indian families, I am welcomed into his home by his lovely wife with their darling baby. Stange the images one keeps of a journey, but that baby in his cradle with his dark hair, dark eyes and gold ear studs is one I'll never forget. Raja Dikshitar helps we with a few facts for an article I'm writing for *Tattwa Loka,* and I promise to help him get one of his published also. He must be rather intellectually stymied in this small town, but he does take opportunities to speak with foreigners who pass through here regularly.

The following night is the grand spectacle of the showing of lights. As I understand it, this ceremony is intended for the *akaasha* (ether) altar. With chanting and twirling the priests show the oil lamps. Then they bring out special lamps with many flames glowing at once, ending with one shaped like a Christmas tree of at least 100 tiny glowing flames. We view the beautiful sight, enhanced by the billowing, dense incense, hot burning *ghee* (clarified butter), and hard cold stone on our feet. In the flickering light, everyone's face glows with the delight. We seem to be lifted out of our little selves, if only for a moment. Interesting observation, since I do not consider rituals part of the true spiritual journey. Nonetheless, they can serve to brighten, uplift, and quiet the mind.

One of the few Hindu temples that has escaped, so far, the iron hand of the Indian government, this temple complex supports a host of priests who are living below the poverty level. Although they belong to the highest caste, the majority of priests have lived the most austere lives throughout all times. When

the British arrived with their need for clerks to interpret between themselves and the populace, the *Brahmans*, being the most educated because they read the numerous scriptures, were to become the chosen few. However, the majority of priests remained apart from any British influence, just like these in Chidambaram.

Then the Indian government imposed their idea of separation of church and state, which is definitely different from the American model. With the claim that the Hindu temple operations are corrupt, government officials have moved in to see what they can do about pocketing the large amounts of money collected in the temples. Unfortunately, they leave insufficient funds for the upkeep of the temples, and the priests, for that matter. They only dare do this in the Hindu temples, never the Moslem or Christian. Interesting phenomena to note how the Hindu religion continues to be undermined by the government, foreign governments in the past, but now the native one is not only following suit, but expanding their methods.

This temple is run by a certain caste of *Brahmans*, the *Dikshithars*. To this day, not one of them has married outside their group. Of a unique, handsome appearance, the men wear their hair in a distinctive manner, twisted into a bun to the side of their head.

Surrounding the temple walls on two sides are the homes of the priests. Since there are more priests than necessary, they have a rotation system for the daily duties. They also draw lots for certain special duties on holidays. Still there is not enough from the donation pot to go around, so many priests do rituals via mail. Usually they receive a small fee to do a monthly ritual for the welfare of a family. Then they mail the ash from the ceremony to the family to smear on their foreheads to partake of the sacred vibration imparted by the ritual.

This practice of letting the priests take care of the spiritual life is not uncommon, particularly in the *Vaishya* caste, which consists of merchants, traders, and landholders. Their duties are such that they simply do not have time to perform religious rites. Throughout the centuries this caste, being the wealthiest, has been the principal financiers of all religious endeavors.

I find the Rajarajan Hotel on West Car Street, the “cheapest and bestest”—only 40 *rupees* a night for a decent room. The proprietors are kind and attentive. I am to discover that this is unusual for Indian hotel staff, who cater to their fellow Indians with the greatest of indifference. Right down the street, I find a place to get an omelet sandwich. In times past, since Chidambaram was inhabited only by vegetarian *Brahmans*, one could not have found an egg in the whole town, but democracy with all its freedoms has brought many changes to Bharata.

When I board the bus to return to Pondy, I find out that the buses are not always in a rush to make up for lost time; sometimes there are other motives. I take off on the 12:30 p.m. bus—on time. But the bus stops two minutes later; while we are still in Chidambaram. I watch the driver and conductor get off the bus. Puzzled, I go up and inquire what is going on. I am told, “It’s lunch time. We have to eat to be able to work.” Who can argue with that logic? So we passengers sit for thirty minutes while the staff have their lunch in the local restaurant.

I arrive back in Pondy just in time for The Mother’s birthday, so Pondy is in a festive mode. People have come from all over India, also from Europe, for the occasion. One couple, visiting from U. S., were among the original founders of Auroville. This community was The Mother’s real dream. She envisioned it as “an experiment in international living where men and women can live in peace and progressive harmony with each other—above all creeds, politics and nationalities.” Times were not easy for residents, especially after The Mother died six years later in 1973. So the couple had moved back to U.S. and returned to a normal life.

Maggie greeted these old friends with her usual enthusiasm, then sent them over to eat at Usha’s. We have six extra people for lunch who fall into this category. Since Maggie is busy in her role as an *ashram* dignitary, Usha has the day off from writing to spend in the kitchen cooking for guests.
Early that morning Maggie sends word to Usha that she has arranged a ride for me to Bangalore with a

friend who will be returning the next day. I just finished typing her manuscript yesterday, so I have waited until the last minute to get everything packed. About 5:00 p.m. another note comes from Maggie. The ride has fallen through, but she has found a taxi for me to hire in the morning for the trip.

“Well, I do feel that I am being pushed out of here. I’m sure it’s time for me to go, and I’m ready to go. However, had I been choosing, I would have chosen to join in the celebration at the *ashram* instead of packing today. Then I could have gotten packed up tomorrow and left the following day.”

“Nancy, you’re not being pushed out. Maggie wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“The day after I complete the manuscript, she arranges a ride for me. When it fell through, why did she arrange for the taxi? I could have done that at my own convenience. I see the way she manipulates you. I cannot imagine why I would be immune.

“And what about that Spanish girl who helped her out with the children during the holidays. As soon as Maggie didn’t need her, she would not help her with a visa extension. So Rosa ended up spending her entire vacation in India baby-sitting. I think she deserved a little consideration to prolong her stay.”

As it turns out, there is one advantage. Maggie is so busy with visitors that she decides she is not going to work the following day, so Usha is able to take the trip with me. She is eager to spend a few hours with her children, who are now in back in school in Bangalore. We plan to leave at dawn’s early light, so that we will arrive by lunch time.

Actually, I had never intended to spend much time in Pondicherry. My plans were to just visit with Usha for a few weeks, then head for a rural ashram outside Bangalore. Immediately upon my arrival, I wrote Swami Sahajananda, the teacher at the place where I planned to stay. However, his reply informed me that he would be away for the winter on a *pada yatra*, pilgrimage on foot. In addition, his three women disciples were all in Bangalore taking a course in English at the university. Sahaja will not return until the first week in April, so it does not make sense for me to go there until then.

Occasionally, I see a newspaper; one carried a story from that area. A herd of elephants had left a national preserve to overrun the nearby sugarcane fields. They had quite a feast, leaving acres of cane destroyed. I do look forward to being in such a rural setting. This is my ideal in coming here, and it seems that Sahaja’s place will be perfect. Then I have big plans for an escape to the mountains before summertime. Summer begins here in April; actually, May is the hottest month in most of India. Usha has some friends in Kottagiri in the Nilgiris, Blue Mountains, of south India. They have a small guest house in the back that they are willing to rent to me for the summer. I have already purchased a great *Birds of India* identification guidebook, so I am prepared to head for the cooler altitudes.

So just when I am accustomed to life in Pondy, I pack up to leave. This world that once was so strange is now familiar. I know where to buy the best papaya, the freshest vegetables, ripe bananas, and all the spots to find *ilanir*. I can now distinguish the bell of the temple elephant from the bell of the rickshaw. I can recognize the horn of the milkman from that of the toy hawker, the cake seller, and the ice cream man. The baah of a goat, the moo of a cow, the chirp of a chipmunk are no longer strange sounds. The vendors at the temple stalls all recognize me and give me local prices: four lotuses, one rupee; five water lilies, one rupee; three *nimbus* for my limeade, only one rupee. Yet I know there are many adventures ahead of me.

Chapter Seven

Encounters with Tradition

Bangalore, the capital of the state of Karnataka, is familiar territory for me—and it's my favorite Indian city. My first visit here was in April of 1978, when the city was decked out in pink, orange, yellow and purple flowering trees, plus my favorite, the fragrant *champak*, a variety of magnolia. Giant mimosa trees stretch their branches over the avenues, turning the pavements into shady archways. Sad to say, in just ten years, the scene is changing. So many trees have been cut down for buildings to be put up, that the naturally temperate climate has begun to warm. Fortunately, Bangalore still maintains some wide expanses of open spaces: parks, cricket fields, military parade grounds. Unfortunately, one cannot enjoy them freely when taking a walk because there are gaping holes in the sidewalks.

I had met Usha and Hari here in Bangalore on that first visit. At that time he was a promising young swami in the Chinmaya Mission, and Usha was a teacher in a Chinmaya school in Kerala. Swami Chinmayananda was enchanted by this intelligent, vivacious young woman, and immediately set out to entice her to become volunteer worker in his organization. Hari, then Swami Harinamananda, was also taken by her, but, unfortunately, for a different reason. Here it is ten years later, and the ramifications of their marriage are still in motion. Only a few Indians are sophisticated enough to forgive a fallen swami, or the woman who "caused" his fall. Unfortunately, their marriage has not survived the various social and economic pressures that have befallen them.

Although we arrive at noon, Usha has very little time, for she must return to Pondy in the taxi we came in—at no extra cost. However, she takes time to escort me to the Aurobindo Bhavan and speaks to the manager to arrange a room for me there. Aurobindo Bhavan used to be the summer home of the king of Nepal. After India's independence, he could not afford the high taxes in the democracy, so he made a charitable donation of the large, rambling two-story house to the Aurobindo organization. They are using is for a center to give classes and retreats. This is familiar territory to Usha; she lived here for two years when Hari was the manager. He was hired as a director, but he was very disappointed with the job as the board vetoed every plan he had for classes and programs (except one). He finally concluded that they simply wanted someone to unlock the gate every morning and lock it every night. He was bored and she was restless. They were given free room and board, but Usha loves lots of *saris*, linens and books, and she did not want to deprive her son of a few luxuries.



Aurobindo Bhavan—Former summer home of Nepalese King

She landed a good job at a near-by university. The board members were furious; they claimed they needed her full-time on the premises. Usha roared (literally) at their expectations that she should remain on call when they had not wanted her to do anything for two long years. Well, she did lead a *bhajan* group for a "bunch of old ladies" once a week, but she could continue to do that. Hari probably could have patched up the damage, but he did not want to stay either, since he was wasting his talent too. He did have a small reserve from an inheritance and Usha had a good job, so they packed into a small two-room apartment, where Hari still lives. Hari now makes a few rupees teaching classes on the scriptures for a fee. Usha felt it was best to try to support herself, rather than supporting the entire family, although she plans to eventually be able to support her son. While Akshay is with Hari, his sister pays the school tuition.

Even though Bangalore seems quite cosmopolitan—broad avenues, modern movie theaters, even great Chinese food—there are subtle glimpses of the old India. For instance, the Banana Leaf Restaurant, where food is served on a banana leaf instead of a plate, reeks of old *Brahman* India. They use the disposable banana leaves to solve the unclean dish's problem. However, the owners have taken a step further into the traditional past. On either side of the entrance gate, you will see a white pumpkin cracked in two, sprinkled with the omnipresent red powder, called *kumkuma*. The remainders of a ritual in which they would have invoked the goddess of wealth for success in their restaurant business. The *kumkuma* is used in association with Devi in her role as creator. In line with the ever-present contradictions of Indian belief, the menstruating woman is condemned as unclean, whereas the red powder representing her fertile blood is used profusely in ritual. As far as I can discern, it symbolizes creation, as well as the force behind creation.

In spite of the modern buses and wide avenues, you will also encounter the sacred cow in the streets. The Indians have a riddle that is intended to suggest the mystery of creation: How does a black cow eat green grass and give white milk? In Bangalore, it's even more of a puzzle. How does a black cow eat brown cardboard, white newspaper and other trash along the city streets and still manage to give white milk?

Another interesting landmark here is the War memorial at the Army Quarters on Victoria Road. Parked in front is the prize trophy: an American armored Patton tank that was captured from the Pakistanis in the 1965 war. In spite of the Pakistan Government's aggression against India, and considerable crimes against its own populace, plus a continued nuclear experimentation, the U.S. persists in pumping money into Pakistan. Considered indispensable to the U.S./Afghan policy, Pakistan received an estimated at

600,000 million in 1988 alone. My practical inclination surfaces, so I ask Hari why the Indians were not using the tank for military purposes themselves. He replies that it is the lack of parts to repair American equipment. Its non-alignment policy, while reasonable to any logical analysis since China and Russia are on the northern border, has cut India out of many perks and bonuses that are available to Pakistan.

After I unpack and rest at the Bhavan, I stroll around the lake to Hari's apartment. When I arrive, Hari greets me with a surprise, "Usha phoned to let us know she has arrived in Pondy safely. Also she wanted to tell you that Mr. Singh's place in Kottagiri will not be available for you. He already has it rented."

"Hummm. I was looking forward to a retreat in the Blue Mountains away from the summer heat. Perhaps, I will like Atheetha Ashram so well I want will to stay there for the summer," I conjecture.

One day while I am in the Bhavan office, I notice an article in the newspaper about a local *Nadi Shastri,* Sri Ramakrishnan. He reads ancient palm leaf scrolls, supposedly that date back to Shukla, the son of the great Veda Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedas. *Nadi Shastris* are not rare in India; you will find at least one in every major city. Sri Ramakrishnan follows in the footsteps of his father, who was quite esteemed here in Bangalore until his death a few years ago. When I show the article to Vani, an American also staying at the Bhavan, she expresses an interest in getting an appointment too.

As soon as we arrive at his home, I manage to commit one of my Indian *faux pas;* that is, I ask for the bathroom. Now this is a traditional *Brahman* household, so they may have appreciated that the *Shudra* (lowest caste person) wants to bathe before approaching the master. However, when I open the indicated door to find only a faucet and a bucket, I realize my mistake. I want the toilet room. The daughter and I have a good laugh; she admits that she was surprised that I wanted to bathe.

After my personal needs are met, she escorts me into her father's office. It is the first time I have seen any palm-leaf books up close. Each individual palm frond has been inscribed in ink, stacked neatly, then bound together. In some cases, the writing was done by cutting with a stylus. Sri Ramakrishna uses my birth date to find my particular page among the palm leaves; some nadi shastris measure your shadow to make the necessary calculations to determine the exact book and page to reference.

I am happily informed that I am going to live to a ripe old age of 90 years with happiness, health, and wealth. In addition, he tells me that I have a good chance for enlightenment in this life time. Now, in my 49th year, I am beginning a cycle in which I will be having cosmic visions to cement my faith. During my next cycle, from 56 to 72, I will be teaching, principally through writing.

Afterwards, he hands me a little slip of paper on which is written the requested donation of $50 U.S. He is going to U.S. next month, so he must be raising spending funds. I never carry that much money on me; I live here on less than $50 a week. When I phoned for the appointment, I asked his secretary the amount of the fee. I was told "Don't worry about that, the important thing is that you get your reading." I put a 50 *rupees* [$6.] note in the donation box and leave it at that. Vani is so irked that I think she did not give anything, which is justifiable under the circumstances.

When we compare notes afterwards, Vani and I both feel that he was too positive—too good to be true. He must have left out some bad stuff. However it's notable that his dates for my past, including my marriage, birth of a child, and my first trip to India did fit. So who knows?
Since Vani is looking for a residence and needs help with extending her visa, he offered her a place to stay here in exchange for helping him with typing and editing of several books he wants to write. He had also mentioned to me that I might be helpful with editing of his upcoming book on the *Nadi Shastra* system.

Vani has led a unique life—lots of travel. Originally, she had gone to Europe to entertain in the American officers' clubs, with an act of singing and playing an accordion. After she traveled all over Europe with her trunk of fishtail sequined gowns, she found out she could pick up work in just about any city in the world, so she took off in her Land Rover across Turkey, Pakistan and landed in Delhi. However, she was

constantly plagued by a terrible, chronic asthma. Even though she was taking quadruple dosage of her medicine, the asthma was intolerable even in dry, hot Delhi. To escape the heat and get a rest, she went up to Kashmir and rented a houseboat. As it turned out, it was the worse thing she could have done, due to the dampness from the lake. She simply could not breathe, and felt that she was ready to end it all. She told the houseboat boy (the boats all come with a servant), "I'm going into the water; just leave me be." He obviously could see her condition and perceived her intention to end the suffering.

"Madam, you come with me. The doctor can help you." He took her to a Moslem herbal practitioner, who gave her some herbs at a pittance of a fee. In three days, she was running up a hill—something she had not been able to do in years. The most amazing part is the asthma, which she had suffered with practically all of her life, never returned—now thirty years later.

At times it's nice to have a companion, but Vani turns out to be one who pushes her way to the front of lines and fights with auto-rickshaw drivers over 2 *rupees* (10 cents). She is so sure that everyone is out to cheat her that she even hand carries all her mail to a post office. There she orders it to be postmarked by hand before her eyes, so no one will steal the stamps. Every time we go out together, I come out on the short end financially because I refuse to bicker over less than 5 *rupees*. She is 62 years of age, and appears quite lost. She wants to find a quiet place to meditate, but no place suits her. I do have my moments of asking myself if this will be me in ten years.
While I am here, the Bombay Editor arrives in Bangalore and meets me briefly at the Aurobindo Bhavan. He is in a hurry because he is having lunch with several writers for the magazine. Since I edit their work it would seem appropriate that I be invited, but I am not. Although I am giving my best efforts to make their magazine as good as possible, my shadow shall never darken the threshold of a traditional south Indian *Brahman* home.

A *Brahman* friend in New York City (incidentally from Bangalore) thought that I might be invited to a *Brahman* home here because of my editing work for a *Brahman* magazine. We warned me if they offer tea to be sure to not touch my lips to the cup. In other words, I am to use the Indian method of drinking without touching the lips to the cup or glass; a technique I simply have not been able to master. In any event, if my lips should touch the china cup, the hostess would have to break it and throw it away. Technically, they would also have to clean the whole house from top to bottom after my departure, but few now bother with this detail. Considering that Prime Minister Nehru, a *Brahman*, would not have had the privilege either; I will consider myself in good company. He was a Kashmiri *Brahman*, which meant he was not a vegetarian, and did not know Sanskrit; therefore, he was on a lower rung of the upper caste.

During the week, the Aurobindo Bhavan sponsors various classes. Both Vani and I start taking the Hindi class. One Saturday afternoon, a Christian Father is to give a lecture on Buddhist meditation. I cut short my time at the library in order to attend. Watching and listening to Father Deepak, I know why I feel so at home in India. Not only is he teaching type of Buddhist meditation, he speaks of the love and inspiration he felt when he read the life of the Hindu saint, Sri Ramakrishna. He related that once a participant questioned him about the religious belief system involved in meditation, he explains that, for him, meditation is beyond beliefs and systems. Further, he informs us that he moves and mingles with anyone who has a broad vision of the Divine. "I have not built a wall around myself, saying 'you have to come inside this structure for us to be able to communicate,'" he concludes.

If you were to study the history of Bharata, you could not conceive how the populace has survived in this land that has been overrun for centuries by vicious looters and murderers. My opinion is the broad, flexible attitude of the Hindus had to be their one and only salvation. This attitude supports the loose, flexible mind that makes true meditation possible.

In the presence of this broad-minded Christian, I have a wonderful meditation. Sometimes in negative situations, I am too sensitive to pick up another's vibration. However, in this case, my sensitivity works to my advantage, for the priest emanates love, peace, acceptance. This peace of being one hundred percent present with my delighted self lasts for several days. I know this feeling and cannot comprehend

why I let it go—but I do.

The best way I can describe it is that I truly see everyone lovely and divine in their own unique way. I am sure you would want to question me: What about the beggars? First, you do not see beggars in Bangalore. Nonetheless, if I were to see one, I would be able to see their divine light that is the essence in all of us. And I probably would not resist giving some donation to help sustain their physical reality.

Chapter Eight

Settling into my Rural Home

After three weeks in Bangalore I take off for Talli, which I hope will become my ideal home—it's definitely in rural India. The driver of my long-distance taxi was once a wealthy businessman; so he speaks English, a rare find in a taxi driver. As we leave the cement block buildings of the suburbs and enter the countryside, he begins to tell me the story of how he became a taxi driver.

One of Indira Gandhi's projects was the nationalization of all bus lines and transport companies. At that time, his bus and transport company was taken over by the Government. Problem is fifteen years have passed and the money for the forced "sale" of his business have not been delivered to the owner. Although he has been to court several times, nothing has been resolved. Each time the court ordered the payments be made, but still the Government has paid no compensation. The whole case is complicated by the fact that, in the interval, the government has changed five or six times. With the political situation in continual turmoil, now there is little hope that he will ever collect anything.

"The government is supposed to protect the people, not prey on them. You put up a fence to protect a mango grove from cows and intruders. But if the fence starts eating the fruit, what can one do?" he poses the rhetorical question.

Now with his savings entirely depleted and his credit gone, he is in a hopeless situation. He confides in me that this is the first day of his new career as a taxi driver. In fact, we did get lost in spite of the fact that he stopped and asked directions to Talli three times. I told him that he was not asking the right type of person; he will learn the hard way as I did—even though I have to continue to get reminders. You have to assess carefully the intellectual capacity of your source of information; then get a second opinion. You cannot just ask directions of any bloke standing along the side of the road who has never even been in a car. Some qualities seep through caste barriers: no Indian will ever tell you, "I do not know"; he will always give some directions to somewhere. They don't want to disappoint you.

"Atheetha Ashram"—A large distinctive gray sign, carefully printed with white letters appears at the entrance gate. A smaller sign warns: "No interview without appointment." Another states: "No visitors after 6:00 p.m." I find out this is an imperative; there is no electricity. Winding beside a small lake, the entrance lane is lined with a profusion of spring colors: purple, pink and white cosmos, verbena, balsam and hollyhocks, with bright fuchsia bougainvillea sprawling over the fence. Just past the one large shade tree, a vibrant green banana grove stretches along the last quarter mile of the road. Many varieties of trees, recently planted, include mangoes, and several flowering varieties including *gulmohar* with its profusion of bright orange blossoms and jasmines. Now they are only about four feet high, but promise a shady border on the curving road in a few years. Little tiles, lettered with mottoes, are posted along the fence. It is a great entrance.



Local banyan tree

As we roll up to the main building, the three *swaminis* [feminine form of *swami*] greet us. After a break for tea, they take the driver under their wings, for we ran out of gas just as we arrived. They send him off on the back of a motorcycle to purchase some gasoline in a nearby village. Soon, he is back and ready to leave. He thanks me for my patience. “Just consider that you had all of your bad luck today, so now it’s finished. From tomorrow I’m sure it will be smooth sailing,” I encourage him.

Actually, the young *swami* who founded this ashram was a catalyst for my desire to return to India for a long-term stay. Swami Shajananda had been a fellow student at Sandeepany, the school of philosophy in Bombay, in 1978. Since my desire was to experience rural India, Swami Sahajananda’s *ashram* seemed to fit the bill for me. The way he described it, I had conjured up a picture that would be the best of two worlds: meditation and classes in the mornings, then some type of service project for the villagers in the afternoons.

Although I had waited for the return of the *swami* from his pilgrimage, when I arrive, he has come and gone again—for a few days. Although the three *swaminis* insist they have been waiting with bated breath for my arrival, although they have no idea where I am to stay since the *ashram* does not have guest quarters yet. Until the *swami* comes back to tell them what to do, they roll out a straw mat and thin mattress for me on the cement floor of the main building.

A loud bell wakes me up the next morning. I jump up to be on time for the *yoga* and meditation. Turning up the flame of the kerosene lamp, I grope around to find a towel. However, the bathroom is already occupied by an Indian woman, also a guest, so it could be hours before it’s free. I like to tease the Indian women that they must have spare parts that we European-stock women do not have because they take so long for their morning baths. Then I hear the thud of wet clothes slapped on the floor; she is doing her laundry also. A bath before the 5:00 a.m. *yoga* class will be impossible, so I stumble over to the *swaminis*’ cottage to at least wash my face.

When I enter the meditation hall, there are only three persons present: two *swaminis* and one guest. The *swamini* who is elder to us does not participate in yoga, while the other guest is still in the bathroom. Atheetha asks if I want to do *yoga* or meditation first. "I prefer *yoga* first, to wake me up," I suggest. We go through the exercise routine, a nice combination of bends, stretches and rolls.

Afterward, Atheetha announces, "Now it's tea time."

"Oh, good," I comment. "I thought that the program stated that tea was served after meditation, not before. I'm sure this schedule will be better for me."

"Nancy, we were all here at 5:00; you did not arrive until 6:00."

They had already done the *yoga* routine, but repeated it because that's what I said I requested. That's how I find out the morning bell is not a wake-up call, but rings between *yoga* and meditation. That evening I dig out my alarm clock and carefully set it for 4:30 a.m., if I am going to get to the bathroom first.

"You know I told Usha in Pondy that I want to be in a place where the birds wake me up every morning. But here at Atheetha, we wake the birds up!" I announce jokingly several days later during the short break between meditation and yoga. As I listen to the birds chirping to cheer the coming of the day, I long to be outdoors with them watching the sunrise.

Our routine is set: one hour of *yoga* at 5:00 a.m., followed by meditation. On some days I have to do get up to exercise during part of the meditation as I am too sleepy to even pretend to meditate. However, one morning I get some help, a lizard drops from the thatched roof right onto my head. The shock definitely wakes me up. After our morning routine, we do have tea. They follow the diet of the Nature Cure system, so there is no breakfast. However, I always have a banana or papaya to tie me over. Both are grown here in the gardens.

I usually take a morning walk around the nearby lake, where I spot lots of cranes and a few herons. This is really rural India: a carpet of green rice fields and scattered villages with as few as 100 people each surrounds us in every direction. In my explorations, I find a stream bed to investigate. Although there is no water yet, I encounter a number of small song birds and lots of lizards sunning themselves on the smooth granite stones. I look for signs of larger animals since we are only five miles from a forest reserve with wild elephants. The terrain is hilly and full of crags and canyons, so not suitable for human habitation. However, it does not seem to bother the elephants.

One day a lovely Indian lady, the one who spends hours in the bathroom, joined me on my walk. Since her husband died two years ago, she has divided her time between her two sons who both live in U. S. Now she is touring India, staying in ashrams and places of natural beauty, in the same style as myself—alone, traveling in public transport. Her journey is quite commendable for a 60-year-old Indian woman.

When I inquire about her relatives in India, I am informed that she is not welcome in the home of any of her family. They are of an orthodox *Brahman* caste, and she has a black mark against her. Her son married an American woman. He is now an outcaste; therefore, his mother is an outcaste. Whether he had his mother's permission did not matter. In point of fact, she had had no input in the matter; he only informed her after the marriage. Had he been in India, he probably would have refrained from committing an action that would boot his mother out of her caste.

These rules and regulations provide the underlying fabric of family loyalty that maintains the moral code in the society. The system has the advantage that everyone has a place in the group and is always is taken care of by the group—when they play by the rules. Surely, this *dharma,* duties, has been a major factor in keeping the Hindu tradition alive in spite of the incursions of the Muslims and Christians. Nevertheless, the foreign defamation has contributed in making the rules more ironclad, in order to persevere. And if you want to be independent and live outside the rules, the system definitely supports that desire too: you

become a *sadhu*.

After lunch and a rest each day, I am working on the next issue, which is on Bharata's foremost *sadhu*, Adi Sankaracharya. Since he is the most important holy teacher of Hinduism in the past 2,000 years, I am personally interested in learning more about him. I read every biography to glean all the reported incidents in which he exhibited any extraordinary powers, since this issue emphasizes *yoga*. Although his orientation was the philosophical aspect of *yoga*, "yoking with the Divine," he did perform various miracles for the sake of others. He was able to move a river, take over the body of a dying king, and, on one occasion, enabled one of his disciples to walk on water.

In addition, his *guru* is believed to have lived to some 1,000 years of age. Of course, modern religious scholars have dismissed this as myth. Honestly, I cannot understand why a Hindu sage cannot live to be such an old age, when Methuselah lived 960 years and only received mention for siring a few children. Sankara's biography also includes a visit by Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedas, who had been dead for centuries. One cannot help comparing the incident with Christ's visit by Moses and Elijah. I am fascinated to dig out what I consider gems of our universal connections.

Each night I take a stroll in the cool air, then lie out under the stars. Ah, yes, there are certainly advantages to having no electricity; the brilliance of the stars being one of them. Music in the background, muted by the distance, contributes a soft background to the deep silence. A lone owl soars by, pivots, then perches on a nearby fence post. It must have spotted some little critter, as it keeps peering at the ground. I feel very content and alive watching this creature of the night. The Indians, like the American Indians, consider the owl a bad omen, but I think they are wonderful and always enjoy the rare occasions when I see one.

Even though I have to sleep with a light wool blanket at night and wear my down vest for morning meditation, it feels like 90 degrees at high noon. We are at about 2,000 feet, for India this climate is about as good as it gets year round. Any higher it is too cold in the winter; any lower it is unbearable in the summer.

On the third evening, Sahaja arrived about 9:30 p.m. I would have been lying out taking in the stars when he arrived, so I do not see him until the next morning.

He greets me with, "How do you like the food?"

"Oh, it's great. Good quality."

"The rice?"

"I've never seen this variety before; it is quite good."

"It's only available in this area. We love it."

I am somewhat taken aback at the nature of his greeting, since I have not seen him for five years. However, I remind myself that Indians are incredibly particular about their dietary customs. I remember I once met a couple in Poona who had taken off for a world tour. At their first stop in Japan, they discovered they could not get anything that even resembled Indian cooking. They took the first plane home and forfeited the fees for the tour. Desirable as it may be, the Indian diet anywhere, even in a millionaire's home, will not measure up to our nutritional standards. However, I refrain from arguing nutrition in a place where a teeming mass, approaching one billion, bears evidence that our American nutritional needs may not be universal.

The *swami* assigns me a small cottage made of cement blocks, which have an open lattice design in place of windows, with a red-tiled roof. I had envisioned a thatched roof with cool thick mud walls, but I can adjust. At this point, they have built for speed and cost, not aesthetics. As it turns out the open lattice, designed to let in the fresh air, also is an open doorway to droves of mosquitoes. Fortunately, I find a

mosquito net in the store room.

In just over a year, Sahaja and four disciples have made a noticeable transformation of this once barren 12-acre plot. They have planted at least a thousand different types of fruit trees: dozens of *chikku* (looks like a kiwi, but tastes much better), custard apple, orange, *nimbu,* plus another hundred of mango. There are only seven residents—five *swamis* and two *brahmacharis,* but the local villagers are hired to do all the heavy work... and it's necessary, they do not even have a decent tool here. Actually, I have not seen any in all of India, not just the *ashrams.* Since there is such cheap labor, no one has bothered to produce efficient tools. Clearly the British also left the gardening to the *mallis* (gardener caste), or they would have imported some decent tools.

The red soil appears to be quite rich. They just poke a stick of hibiscus or bougainvillea in the ground and it grows. They took a large branch of a pipal tree, cut it into two-foot pieces, 2" in diameter, then stuck them in the ground and watered. Two weeks later, I am amazed to find the branches sprouting bright new leaves.

When I first met Sahaja at Sandeepany, he was an expert in Nature Cure even then. Since he was always helping the half-dozen foreigners with any medical problems that came up, mostly digestion and dysentery, we all knew him well. I saw him again in the Himalayas five years ago when he was taking his renunciation vows to become a swami. At that time, he had already founded and built his own ashram in Coimbature. With the idea of creating a self-sufficient community, he had built a complex that included vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, a dairy, student quarters and a retirement home for the elderly; plus a school for the local children. I was quite impressed; so when he invited me to come there to live, I thought it a great idea.

In the meantime, Sahaja has had a falling out with the "powers that be" of the Chinmaya Mission in Coimbature. Sahaja regularly gave lecture tours and camps to raise funds for his ashram, which he sent to the accountant for the Coimbature Mission. However, they were not available when he needed them for a project in the ashram; in fact, it appeared that some funds had disappeared. Anyway, Sahaja bravely cut his losses and walked out of the ashram that was technically his property. The only criticism of Sahaja that anyone could manufacture was that he took the cows. No one mentioned that he signed the papers handing the property over to the Chinmaya Mission. As if the Pondy intrigues were not enough, I am afraid this is another perfect example to prove that Swami Nischalananda's avoidance of spiritual organizations is wise. This will not be the only example I see of what transpires when businessmen, who are the ones who generously support the ashrams or religious organizations financially, begin to take control of it. Neither will it be the only report of the overseers dipping into the treasury themselves.

Sahaja really deserves credit for creating a second ashram. With one other swami and three swaminis, two of them giving considerable donations, Sahaja obtained this land and started over again. To get the funds for the buildings and gardens, he had to live here on the property for a year by himself. Now he seems quite relaxed, yet self-assured. I appreciate his soft smile and gentle approach to the daily problems, for no one makes a move until they find out what "the swami says."

My inner purpose for coming to India was to find a place for regular spiritual practices, particularly meditation, since being with a group helps me to be disciplined. Also, I wanted to continue the study of Hindu philosophy, including Sanskrit, which I love. Also knowing that I am not one to meditate all day, I had thought that Sahaja's set-up, on the Coimbature model, would be perfect. At least that is what he had described to me when I saw him in the Himalayas. But a few days after Sahaja arrived, the two other guests leave. That's when I discover that meditation is not compulsory. The next morning, I find myself alone in the hut for yoga and meditation in the mornings.

However, I am definitely experiencing rural India. I've seen my first cobra. I am sure he saw me first, as I hardly caught a glimpse of him before he spotted me and quickly slid off the path into the grass. I hardly had time to be frightened. The workers just found a five-foot cobra skin, so it is probably the same fellow. Sahaja says that to see a cobra is very auspicious. If I am lucky, the cobra will show itself to me

again. He goes on to relate that it follows him around. No comment.

Daily, the chipmunks and mice living in my tiled roof and dropping poop and nesting grass all over my room is providing enough of an encounter with nature for me. However, I do have a very welcome guest, a little toad. His attraction is the kerosene lamp. He sits in contemplation every evening and feasts on the bugs it attracts. Although I appreciate his company, I leave the door open every day so he can make an escape when he wants. After a couple of weeks, he disappears.

Before long my experiencing of nature turns into confronting it. The first time I am awakened by a critter in bed with me, a corner of the net has come untucked. When I wake up enough to realize that something is crawling around, I flash the flashlight and see a mouse tail hanging down from the corner of the net. So I get out of bed and shake the net, hoping that he will fall down and run off. Because of the dark I have to guess what is happening; it's not as if I can turn the light on and see what is happening. When I do not see any movement, I have to take my bed totally apart, including removing the mattress, but I still cannot find it. When I spot it, it has somehow migrated to the opposite corner of the net. Carefully, I untie the net, then fold it to trap the frightened little gray fellow, then carry the bundle outside, and hang it on the clothesline, leaving him to figure out how to escape. Fortunately, he does; he is gone when I check it in the morning. I felt as I was doing a piece for a silent Laurel and Hardy flick, it was even funny while I was doing it.

Then I have another uninvited guest, a country-sized mouse in my net again; this one chewed his way through the white gauze. Since it is 2:30 a.m. and I get up at 3:30 a.m., I think I may as well get up, so I just vacate the premises to him. When I return later, he has gone, so I patch up the hole.

Then a larger creature moves in. During the night, I keep hearing a gnawing sound. When I mention the possibility of a rat, Sahaja pooh-poohs it with "we only allow mice here." I try to find a rat cage-type trap, but with no cooperation. I cannot even procure a rat trap from the store room without the *swami's* permission. A couple of mornings later, I find half of a papaya has been consumed during the night. So Sahaja brings a trap over. Luckily, we managed to catch the rat that first evening. Fortunately, Sahaja walked with me to my room to check the trap, so he took care of carrying the trap out of my room.

It is really strange how one can become adjusted to such circumstances, if they are brought on slowly and surely. And the mice are such cute little fellows. I wonder why we fear them so. But the rat, no, there was nothing cute about that rat!

Chapter Nine

The Swami Says

All residents have their own realm of responsibility, in which it appears they possess a good deal of freedom. One of the *swaminis* is in charge of the kitchen; another oversees agriculture and gardening. Another *swami* coordinates and supervises construction of all the buildings, while Sahaja administers the whole operation, as well as giving classes. He plans to teach a class in Sanskrit and another on one of the philosophical Vedanta texts soon.

Sahaja has the inspiration that my responsibility will be taking charge as the director of his new Nature Cure retreat. My protests that I know nothing of Nature Cure fall on deaf ears. At his insistence, I begin reading Sharma's handbook on Nature Cure. I am always interested in natural health techniques, so I am open to the system. Although developed in Europe, Nature Cure is quite well known in India because of its most famous proponent, Mahatma Gandhi. The principal tenet is cleansing, both inside and out, using baths, enemas, and fasting with liquids. Several of Gandhi's young disciples later complained of having to carry all his tubs and bathing paraphernalia on their long treks. According to Sahaja, Nature Cure is rational fasting. The fast gives the body an opportunity to rest and regain its own innate strength.

The first few days the two younger *swaminis* attempted to speak English as much as possible as they were eager to practice. The truth slowly emerges that, even though they were professors of English at a small university before donning the orange robes of renunciation, they have never spoken with a native English speaker until now. This autumn they are planning to teach an English course to all the English teachers in this district, charging a sizable fee, so naturally they want to use the opportunity to speak with me as much as possible. Soon their enthusiasm dissipates, and they begin to converse in Tamil. I am beginning to enjoy this "non-involvement"; it makes life easier. Besides, when they practice English by repeating my words, I cringe every time I hear them echoing my southern accent. I write to a friend that she is going to have to come soon to save everyone from my southern twang.

Non-involvement may be apparent, but certainly not "non-action." As my first project, I throw myself wholeheartedly into gardening. Spring is the perfect time of the year for it. They have a huge pit for compost and manure, but it's never been watered or turned—and would be impossible for me to do so since it is mostly just dry stalks and straw. So I start digging it out and distributing it over a large garden plot. The others are not enthusiastic about my project, but manage to make only a few barbs. I understand their problem is seeing me do "dirty work," but I pretend that I do not know.

Soon another group of guests arrives at the *ashram* who are planning to buy land in this area to create a Gandhi Village. One of them is an organic and natural gardening expert, so he assures Sahaja that what I am doing in the garden is perfect. Sahaja gets all enthusiastic and hires laborers from the village to dig out all the debris from the pit and distribute it over the existing garden. I watch as the human bull-dozer takes over. I had been enjoying spreading a dozen baskets of compost every morning. If I had an acre of land and a barnyard of manure, I would spread it out a wheel barrow at a time, probably taking six months to do the task, while enjoying the exercise. Even in the land of ox carts, I am out of sync.

The next morning, the guest gardener comes running to fetch me. The laborers dumped the compost up against the stalks of a lot of small fruit trees and curry plants, so he is afraid their stalks will burn from the heat of the compost. So we work all morning pulling the straw and manure away from the stalks to save them.

One of the projects of the Gandhi Village will be to have a repository of all the original, non-hybrid varieties of Indian fruits and vegetables, which are fast being replaced by the influx of hybrids from the

West. Using hybrids means importing chemical fertilizers that bring new diseases and pests that have to be combated with insecticides, usually purchased from the West. There is now an underground movement to reverse this process. The logic is simple: Lands exist here that have been farmed for over 2,000 years. This land is still arable and fertile due to native methods of natural fertilizers, crop rotation, and letting parcels lie fallow for a season. In U. S., there is land that was once arable, but is now useless, after less than 200 years of crops. Now who should be teaching agriculture to whom?

These guests are planning to create a community with the principles of natural living and gardening as propounded by Gandhi. With Sahaja's help, they are trying to buy a 125 acre plot near here. The purchase is complicated by the fact that this land was divided into small plots and distributed to the landless after independence, which means there are some thirty owners to deal with. This reconsolidating back into large plots is happening all over Tamil Nadu. Not finding it economically feasible to work such small holdings, the owners have abandoned them and headed for the cities. They will be eager to get any money they can from the sale, but finding the actual owners is the challenge. The land has water, a nice pond, and at least one-third is already irrigated. Since it borders on a forest preserve, we find fresh elephant dung on the property on our first trip. They make immediate plans to erect a tower to be able to enjoy elephant watching.

Several in the group have connections with the locally famous architect, Laurie Baker. From the way they talk, he may even come over to help design their dwellings. Actually, Baker is a designer, builder and contractor, all in one. They say he will not even design an edifice without considering its site and local resources: stone, brick, mud (adobe). Then he has his own trained team for the actual building, which he personally supervises. I did not realize that he was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. He had met Gandhi quite by accident on his first visit to India from Britain. At that time he was a young man with an education in modern architecture. However, he was also a Quaker and had come to India on a project to help lepers, specifically converting old asylums into modern rehabilitation centers.

Since his projects were in remote, rural India, his creative mind became fascinated with India's indigenous structures. Now he explains, "...I am only following principles evolved hundreds of years ago in this country.... There was so much self-expression, indigenous style, and unplanned variety those days. So much individuality." This impression, plus Gandhi's words to him, "The ideal house in the ideal village will be built with materials all found within a five mile radius of the house," have been his guide. Since he settled in Trivandrum, Kerala, 25 years ago, he has produced some 1,000 homes and over 40 public buildings including churches, schools, hospitals and offices—all with native materials and natural ventilation. Although all of his projects are cost effective because of the emphasis on the appropriate use of local resources, he is particularly known for his low-cost housing for the poor. I am sure the presence of the Gandhi Village will add a new dimension to life at Atheetha.

However, I am a bit disappointed to find out that their project is principally a commercial enterprise—a vacation resort in the country for the wealthy from the city. They are all special people, so I am sure anything they do will be unique. Interestingly, since they arrived here, the early morning bell has started ringing again. Now Sahaja and the *swaminis* arrive every morning at 4:00 a.m. for yoga and mediation, along with the new guests. So I have my group support at least for the week that they are here. Afterward, the morning bell remains silent.

Sahaja personally assigns my next project. He wants me to design and direct the construction of a nice garden with pond by the office cum school building. No sooner said than done. I measure and sketch a plan, then write my son to send specifications on pumps for waterfalls, as well as some photos that I can share with Sahaja. I have spotted some beautiful smooth gray stones in the nearby creek bed that will be perfect. Just when I have everything planned, a big truck arrives with a load of the ugliest rocks I have ever beheld. I am a rock person; I love rocks. Until I behold these huge red-brown, dirty boulders, I had not realized that there were such ugly rocks on the planet.

"Here are your stones," Sahaja informs me.

“Well.... those are not exactly what I had in mind. Usually stones for a waterfall are smooth and flat, not big jagged balls.” I had been eying some beautiful ones along the stream bed on my morning hikes.

Obviously, he chooses to ignore my comment, for he questions, “Now where were you going to put the waterfall?”

I walk over to the spot to show him that there is about a 3- foot slope in one spot that we can use to advantage. By adding some height by building up a knoll, we can get a 4-foot drop.

“But I want a ten foot waterfall.”

“But the land is practically flat.”

The *swami* says, “That does not matter, we will just dig the hole deeper.”

The *swami* has spoken. He walks off before I can explain that if you dig the hole deeper, you will get a deeper pond, not a higher waterfall. *Never mind. It’s just as well*, I tell myself.

Then there’s the Nature Cure Center to deal with. Every day there is the horrendous pounding of hammers, along with grinding of trucks, blasting from the construction of the new center. Sahaja asked me to design the set-up for each of the rooms. All of the furniture, including the bed, is to be constructed of a type of natural black stone. I make drawings of bookshelves, nightstand, etc.; but the *swami* says it’s not what he wanted. So he proceeds with his own ideas—which are good ones.

My real concern is that the bathrooms are too far away from the cabins. The *swami* says that cannot be helped. I have to conclude that only the *swami/swaminis* can have private bathrooms, for the rest of us share. So I recommend that at least a shade be put up over the walkway that goes from the cottages to the toilets. Since fasting is a major part of Nature Cure, I do not feel that an empty stomach and this blistering sun present a happy picture.

My plan for mosquito nets is also vetoed. The *swami* says the netting will cut off the fresh air necessary for health. Of course, we are all sleeping under nets or we would be dive-bombed all night long by hundreds of mosquitoes. I have even tried to find some old netting to rig up a refuge for my morning meditation. Since no one else is showing up in the morning, I end up just sitting in my bed for meditation to protect myself from the mosquitoes... and other creatures.
Sahaja and I remain deadlocked on the idea of my being the director of his Nature Cure center. On the one hand, I know he is going to be the one in charge. I have no illusions about his relinquishing any authority to me; he has not even considered my practical suggestions about shade and mosquito nets. On the other hand, I do not have time for another commitment.

Because the magazine was several issues behind when I arrived, I spend two weeks, including the one in Bangalore, out of each month totally focused on writing and editing. Finally, the truth emerges that Sahaja has plans to rent a big billboard in Bangalore to advertise the “Health Resort” with the American’s name on it to give it authenticity. I voice my opinion that anything that requires an American’s name to validate it is questionable at best. An irrelevant argument at best, but the fact that it could cause me to lose my visa status is not. My protests continue to fall on deaf ears. I do not even bother to voice my opinion about calling these primitive, although quaint, huts a resort.

After I have been here for less than three weeks, I have attained certain non-spiritual realizations:
1) No one is the slightest bit interested in my opinion, and anything I know immediately falls into the category of opinion, therefore, is immediately dismissed.
2) Further, there is no place on the planet that is going to be in line with my desires, wants and wishes, so I will have to bear it here or bear it some place else.

The truth is I have taken Abraham Lincoln’s advice: “We are as happy as we make up our minds to be.” I am not going to let anyone get my goat—for over five minutes anyway. All the speaking of Tamil

continues to be good practice in non-involvement for me. My usual mode is to be very dedicated to knowing what is going on. In the beginning, I tried to remind the others to speak English when I was around, but now even hearing them speak my name in Tamil conversation no longer fazes me.

Finally, the day arrives that the pounding, grinding and hollering halt, leaving us in silence. That afternoon, Sahaja call us all together to inaugurate the Center. He has already informed me that I have to light the lamp during the ceremony. I am very hesitant because I am afraid it has some symbolic meaning that I have accepted the directorship. After the chanting of a prayer, the lamp is to be lit. Sahaja, always cool and collected, steps back and looks over to signal me. At that moment, a young woman rushes forward and lights the lamp! Evidently, she has some misgivings about the director being someone who does not know the language too. I sigh—that was a close one.

A small boy, Jagdish, becomes another one of my projects, unsuccessful, but perhaps not a complete failure. A year ago when Sahaja started building here, Jagdish came here with his parents. At that time his father was a laborer hired for constructing the huts, while his mother helped in the kitchen. After some time, his father took off. Then a few months later, his mother left too, abandoning Jagdish to the fate of growing up in the *ashram*. I do not know what their frustrations were that they felt the setting here was not adequate for them, for Sahaja says he pays "better than" fair wages. Although we can rationalize that they knew that their son would receive better care here than they could give, I think it is unusual for the lower classes to abandon a child. However, I am also sure they have a totally unique moral system imposed by their economic situation. The comments I make about the customs of Indians I personally know will not necessarily apply to the poor, who have their own rules of ethics and morals.

One of the *swaminis* has started a school here, starting with first grade this year. I am bewildered to find out that Jagdish does not attend the classes. When I question him, the *swami* says that Jagdish does not speak Tamil, since his parents came from Andhra Pradesh. In fact, no one in the ashram speaks Jagdish's native Telegu. "Wouldn't that be all the more reason for him to be attending classes in Tamil," I suggest, making the greatest effort to allow only friendly tones out of my mouth. Further, I am informed, they have no idea how old he is, so they would not know what grade to put him in.

"I am sure that the first grade is perfect for him; obviously, he has to start at the beginning," I comment. Then part of the truth emerges, but surely not all. The *swami* says he needs Jagdish at the ashram entrance to open and close the gate. Because of the construction of the Nature Cure retreat, trucks are coming and going continually. Someone has to be there to monitor the gate or cows might wander in and eat all the lovely flowers.

Jagdish is entirely on his own. I see him in the mornings washing his clothes on the flat stones by the bath house. Using the gardener who keeps an eye on Jagdish as an interpreter, I tell Jagdish to bathe at night also because he is incredibly filthy after playing in the road all day. To pass the bath house when he is bathing is a real stitch. Jagdish likes to sing when he bathes. He never goes to the bhajan singing here, but he must have hung around and listened. He belts out holy songs at the top of his lungs, amazingly loud for such a small set of lungs. After his bath he comes to my room for a ten minute class in English.

Then I go off on one of my tangents. Since no one knows Jagdish's birth date or age, I decide we should assign them to him. He can be seven and his birth date April 1; it's coming up and easy to remember. I am going to Bangalore soon to finish up and mail the latest magazine issue I have edited. While in the city, I can get some Indian sweets, so that we can have a little party for Jagdish. The *swaminis* are all for my plans and even yell after me, "Be sure to bring plenty of sweets for us," as I am leaving for Bangalore.

So I return to the *ashram* with candy, a couple of toys and some clothes. The main gift is plastic bat and ball so that Jagdish can practice cricket during the long hours he spends at the front gate. Just before lunch, Swamini Atheetha approaches me to inform me that the *swami* says we cannot have a party for Jagdish, that I better go speak with him.

Later I find the *swami* in the *swamini's* room, sitting on her bed with the three *swaminis* gathered around.

"Nancy, you simply cannot have a birthday celebration for Jagdish. We are *swamis;* we don't practice such things."

"Of course, you don't. Personally, I don't consider mine a cause for celebration either. However, we are dealing with a six or seven year old. I fail to see the comparison."

"But if you do it for him; everyone will expect it."

"Atheetha, are you going to expect a birthday party?" I ham it up a bit to give myself time I take in the situation. I am finding it difficult to get into this issue.

"What about Chinna? We have never given him a party," Sahaja reasons.

"But Chinna has made his own conscious choice to be here as a *brahmachari,*" I counter.

"But we don't want to set a bad example."

"Chinna is sixteen and pledged to a religious life. Frankly, he does not seem the type to get jealous of a seven year old. I bet he will be glad someone is giving Jagdish a party," I answer him.

"Well, none of us are going to the dining hall at lunch today. We cannot participate in such things," the *swami* says.

"Fine." I give a disgusted roll of my eyes at the three *swaminis* standing there like a row of cuckoo birds.

Ashrams are the only place one can get free from labor with no complaints from family or society. Chinna and the cowherd are both examples of the exploitation of young people in ashrams, for they get no compensation at all for their work. Whereas Sahaja had told me he pays top wages "to be fair," this would not include these young students. As *brahmacharis,* the boys do the labor in exchange for their food and a below-standard cot and blanket. They came here with the idea of seeking a training in spiritual life. However, they end up working from sunup to sundown, more than they would be doing if they had remained at home where they would have siblings and cousins sharing the work. I am not the only one who is disenchanted with the lack of spiritual practices. The cowherd mentioned to me that Sahaja had promised him daily yoga classes and meditation. Even the few times they have had morning classes, he has not been able to attend because that is milking time.

Chinna is the go-fer. I wish I had a *rupee* for every time the *swami* or *swaminis* stand on their porches and call "Chinna, Chinna"—sometimes two of them at the same time from two different directions. I am thankful they do not have a loud speaker system....yet. But it may not be long. A TV arrived today. Sahaja once told me that there were several *laks* of *rupees* coming in monthly to the *ashram,* and I do not see any evidence that he exaggerated. One of my major spiritual goals is to develop the capacity to achieve continual peace of mind no matter the external circumstances. I am sure getting some practice at that—but I wanted a place that it would be easy!

Chapter Ten

Dancing in the Mountains

Just as I am beginning to become disenchanted with everything including my personal meditation practice, I have a pleasant surprise. Sahaja is going to Kottagiri for a spiritual camp. Since I originally had the idea of spending the summer in the mountains there, I ask if I can go along. Sahaja is quite agreeable. Soon we are loaded in the *ashram* car and bound for the cooler climes of a hill station. The car is an old Renault, which I label the "silver streak," since they have spray-painted it shiny silver.

The Nilgiris, Blue Mountains, are an extensive range of mountains in southwest India, rising to 9,500 feet. Although the British had most of their hill stations in the Himalayas, they had several summer retreats in the south too. After a long, hot journey across the plains, once we start ascending the foothills the temperature starts to dip. En route I find it definitely pays to travel with a *swami*. We are invited to several villages in which I'm sure no white face has ever entered.

The country folk of south India love to dance; for many, it is a part of their worship. They dance ecstatically as if possessed by a god, in an attempt to actually invite the god to come down, take over, and dance through them. In one village we visit, the women give a performance, then all of us join in. In another place, we dance down a long road from one village to another, drums beating all the way. I just love the dancing because I've always thought we modern Americans don't sing and dance enough, just to have fun, like the pioneer's barn dances. So my Tamil vocabulary begins with the two phrases: "Let's dance" and "Let's sing."

In a larger village, arrangements have been made for lunch. We all line up in long rows with their banana leaf placed on the ground in front of us. Then huge pots are carried down the lines to serve everyone. The food is typical of this area: a stew of potatoes, kidney beans, and yellow pumpkin served over plain white rice: all carbohydrate, little protein, with no green or raw vegetables.

These are all self-sufficient agricultural communities. Although I assume that the men build the houses, however, the women do all the other work—in the home and in the fields. The only implement they have to work the fields is a short-handled hoe. At least once a year, the men have the duty of taking any excess harvest to the nearest city to sell in order to buy any supplies that the villagers cannot produce.

In one village, part of the entertainment for the *swami* is a group of six women singing a ballad recounting their hard life. It goes something like: Even when we work hard to produce the crops to have money to buy some chain, the men come home empty-handed, saying the chain was too expensive. Since the money was so little, they just spent it on having a spirited time.

The men protest to the *swami* that it is not true, but the women stand their ground. Of course, I miss the details due to my lack of Tamil. The inhabitants here believe themselves to be immigrants from the Bangalore area whose ancestors fled here several hundred years ago to escape Moslem oppression. However, I notice that all the complainants are wearing gold earrings and nose rings—never less than 18-karat. The jewelry is a unique style, the nose ornament is like a sun disk about the size of a dime with a semi-precious stone in the center.

When we finally arrive in Kottagiri, I find it is not quite what I expected. Unfortunately, because of the tea plantations, Kottagiri is not what it used to be. Chinese tea was introduced into Britain in the 17th

century and quickly became a favored beverage. When the supply diminished due to failing trade with China, the British turned to India, forming the Committee of Tea Culture in Calcutta in 1834. Wild tea plants, a variety of the Camellia genus, were found in the northeast region of India. However, the flavor was not as pronounced as the Chinese variety. Finally, in 1842, Chinese seed was obtained for a planting in Darjeeling, which produced a highly successful crop.

Then the government turned to Assam, one of the most beautiful areas in the world—my appraisal is based on the number of wild orchids growing there—and ordered it cleared for tea. In 1854 the Assam Clearance Act gave away up to 3,000 acres of prime land to any European planter who promised to cultivate tea for export to England. At that time, there was only one large tea plantation in British India, but 20 years later, the number of estates had grown to 300. Three hundred estates of 3,000 acres indicates how fast Assam was cleared of its primeval forests.

That's the difference in tea and coffee plantations. Coffee likes gentle shade so all the largest trees are preserved to make a canopy over the crop. However, tea requires lots of sun, so the natural landscape is laid bare. After Assam was devastated, the planters moved here to the Blue Mountains, finding Kottagiri a prime spot for tea plantations. Since I find very few patches of native trees here, I figure it's just as well my plans for spending the summer here fell through. Neither do I see any evidence of the Kotta tribe; *Kotta-giri* meaning "mountain of the Kottas."

One afternoon at tea time, I drop by to meet the Singhs with whom I had communicated by letter from Pondicherry, so they will know me as Usha's friend. A gracious gray-haired lady greets me at the door. After I introduce myself, she invites me in. While we are sitting and chatting, mostly my giving her the news of Usha, Mr. Singh enters the room.

"Oh, this must be Maggie. You have arrived."

"No, this is Nancy, Usha's friend."

"Well, we have been expecting Maggie. She'll stay for the summer," Mr. Singh comments.

"I honestly did not know that Maggie was coming here. She must have made those plans after I left Pondy." *Just after,* I mumble under my breath, remembering Usha's phone call informing me that the Singh's place was taken. Of course Maggie never shows up, so the Singhs are left without rental income that summer.

Mr. Singh is a charming, dignified gentleman who had worked as a manager of a factory in Ooty. As he is going to drive over there tomorrow, he asks me if I would like to accompany him. Of course, I'd love to check out this famous hill-station of the British, which is at 7,500 feet. I've already found out why the British headed for the hills during the hot season, I have to sleep in my down sleeping bag every night. However, the daytime temps are quite pleasant.

So early the next morning, we head out, winding through the hills. Mr. Singh has lived in this area for some time and is quite informed about the tribals, the Todas, around Ooty. Since they were the residence of the highest altitudes, they had huts, similar in shape to the Navajo Indian hogan, that had to be entered by a 6-foot tunnel, designed to keep out the cold and wind. He reports that many of them are going to regular schools now, choosing to live off a job instead of the land.

After he has a short meeting, we have lunch at the executive dining room of the company he retired from. Afterward, he is ready to return home. I am eager to see the botanical garden and ask him to drop me off there. Although I thought he understood that I am going to spend the night here, he appears quite puzzled. He tries to talk me out of it, for his mindset does not include a single woman spending the night alone in a hotel. However, he eventually complies with my wishes.

The botanical garden is lovely. The British had such a fascination with tropical plants; they were digging up, cataloging and shipping plants all over the Empire. I stroll around through rhododendrons, roses and a pond filled with water lilies. Then I sit in a shady grove surrounded by fuchsias, prepared to watch

the birds for hours. Unfortunately, there is an interruption in my peaceful nook. A gaggle of young Indian men descend upon me. I am beginning to notice a particular phenomenon. Young men, about 18 to 20 years of age, roam about, seemingly, with the sole purpose of being obnoxious. A foreigner becomes prime prey for their pestering game. However, I am always dismayed to discover that if you meet one of them in a one on one encounter, they are the kindest, most helpful, kids you'll ever find.

Since I've enjoyed a couple of hours in the garden, I decide it's time to arrange for my over-night accommodations anyway. I pick a non-British spot to spend the night, the Fernhill Palace, which was the summer home of the Maharajah of Mysore. However, it is not entirely correct to call it non-British, as by the time this building was constructed everything was built in imitation of the conquerors. There's carpet on the floors, heavy dark velvet drapes, with the staff and servers still decked in the uniforms existent in 1947, the end of the prince's sovereignty. The princes were able to keep their private holdings, like this summer retreat, but in the 1970's, in the role of Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi used her power to cut off their monthly stipend that the Government was under contract to pay them. Therefore, some of the princes have been forced to sell property or to open their second homes to the public to raise income.

After a hassle over the rate, the manager finally agrees to charge me the price given in my tour book. He first tries to justify the high price by saying it is the high-season. I don't buy it. "But I'm the only person in the whole place" is my reply. He makes it up to me later by giving me a tour of all the rooms, including the Maharaja's bedroom, which goes for a premium price. Happily, I settle into a lovely little room with a wall of windows that overlook a lovely garden.

What was an elegant ballroom is now the dining room, huge and formal with a ceiling two stories high. I have no idea what the ballroom was used for in the Maharaja's day. Indians dance to invite the deities, not to entice a partner—those arrangements are made by Mom and Dad. When Indira Gandhi made a state visit to Washington, D.C., President Johnson made the *faux pas* of asking her to dance at a reception given in her honor. She politely refused with the comment that her countrymen would not have understood. Not have understood? If they had not have stoned her, it would have been a supreme test of the Indian passivity. As we saw during independence in 1947, although Indians can tolerate any treatment from foreigners, they are capable of attacking each other unmercifully.

When I enter the room, only one table is filled, with an elderly Indian couple. That means we have about three servers to each table. But there is one stone in the rice. I don't know if it were originally designed like this or not, but the upstairs bar has a huge window that opens, overlooking the dining room. By some weird quirk of fate, someone is playing an American cowboy movie on the TV there. A cowboy movie in this isolated spot; no wonder the Indians stereotype America as the place where they have tall buildings and shoot each other. The shooting of pistols is blasting down over the dining room. Now I have tolerated a lot of noise since my arrival in India, but just at this very moment, I reach my limit. It seems that I tolerate foreign noises better than those of my countrymen.

I get up, go to the manager's desk, and register a complaint. With a smile plastered over my face and in a soft voice (honestly), I explain that I am in this beautiful spot to have a lovely dinner; therefore, I am not interested in having the evening ruined by a stupid blaring American cowboy movie. He doesn't get the point. He really tries, but he just can't understand why I am not happy. Finally, I switch methods; I tell him what I want. I would like to hear some lovely classical music. Now, I don't say Indian classical music, for I assume that is all that is available. He assures me he will have the movie volume turned down, look for a tape recorder, and try to find a tape of music. I thank him with dignity and grace, and return to my table.

Five minutes pass; the movie volume is lowered. That's progress. Then the manager waves to me that he has found some music. I hold my breath. Suddenly I'm sure that all the young man will have is hard rock. But the *gods* are with me; it turns out to be wonderful classical harpsichord music. Although I've rarely had opportunities to listen to it, the sharp sounds of the harpsichord always strike some emotional note in me. With my eyes moist, I drift through dinner, savoring every bite, while hardly tasting it either. In this decadent setting, the strains carry me away to a time far away, long forgotten. By the time I finish eating, the other two diners have left, so I have the whole place to myself. I just get up and start to dance

with the music. There's one big corner with no furniture, so I twirl toward it. I become a butterfly, a bird, a *diva*; I soar in delight with the music. White eye-balls glisten in the dark corner nearest the kitchen—the whole staff is out watching the white lady dance. At least for a moment, I lose my shyness of being in front of an audience. I don't miss a beat: "It's a beautiful moment in my beautiful life."

After two weeks in Kottagiri, including four days on the road, we return to Talli to prepare for an up-coming spiritual camp. Both going and returning, we spend the night in Salem in the home of a delightful couple. The wife is a very intelligent lady, a doctor, who runs a nursing home, which actually is a type of hospital here. The husband is quite interested in homeopathy, so we exchange notes on that subject. Also, extremely informed on Indian politics and economics, he keeps us laughing with the latest jokes about politics in India. Here's a couple of examples:

A contractor placed a bid for construction of a dam. Just to get the contract, he had to pay 15% to the top official, then 12% to the second, then 10% to the third in command. When the fourth official appeared and asked for another 10%, the contractor balked: "Look, there is no way I can build that dam at a price less than 50% of the bid. I certainly want to make a profit myself."

"Why, that's no problem. Why would you waste your time in building a dam? No one will ever check whether you built it or not," was the official reply.

Another one: An official needed some extra income to get his daughter married. One of his cohorts suggested that he milk the system by putting in an application to have the local lake filled in.

"But what lake? There's no lake here," questioned the official.

"That's just the point," the clerk replied. He went on to explain that the official who had previously held the top position also had needed money for his daughter's wedding. Therefore, he had requisitioned central government for funds to dig a lake for drought relief, and then spent the money on the wedding. Since the lake never existed, it would be quite easy to remove. "Now, the drought is over, you can requisition funds to fill it in."

His favorites are political, but here's another one I've heard several times: When President Kennedy visited Delhi, he rebuked Prime Minister Nehru for the hygiene in Delhi. There's a man taking a leak on every corner, he observed. Nehru stuffed his embarrassment, until he went to visit U.S. While there, he was ever alert trying to spot someone pissing in the streets. He had no luck until he was just ready to leave. Fortunately, Kennedy had accompanied him to the airport.

Nehru pointed to the tarmac, "Look, there's a man out there pissing in public." "Go get that man and bring him here," Kennedy ordered. The officials obeyed and brought the culprit to the statesmen. Sure enough he was an Indian.

The Indians have a great capacity to laugh at themselves. When I think about it, I can never remember one ever becoming defensive, not even when I make my little cynical remarks, such as "is that Indian time or is that American time," when arranging a meeting. Surely their wonderful sense of humor has been another factor that has saved their culture from the ravages of time--and foreigners.

Chapter Eleven

Spiritual Pursuits?

Before gardening in the coolest hours of the day, both morning and late afternoon before the trip, which meant that I was hardly meditating. Upon our return, I switched to emphasizing meditating daily, so now I am hardly gardening. Although I loved the sunshine, fresh air and exercise, it seems this schedule is more in line with my personal goals. Since no one appreciates my gardening efforts anyway, it's not as though I am contributing anything to the cause.

I am reading Thomas Merton's *Ascent to Truth*, a guide to meditation, which I found in Sahaja's library. Through it, I have been reminded of my desire to have a real spiritual guide, someone capable of sitting with me and giving me some personal guidance like "you are stuck at such level because of such and such," or "try this, it could be your next step." Spiritual seekers have found such people in the past, and I assume they still exist. However, with the monsoon and heat, it's really not feasible to travel now. So in the meantime, I will remain peacefully with my own practice, so I can conserve what little energy I have.

After my daily meditation, I wonder what I am going to do today. It is written that the Indian sages repose in their Divine Nature, never needing to act or avoid acting. Since I cannot rest in my Divine Nature due to certain innate inadequacies, I will have to act. This is how Merton put it—we are not chasing objects for their sake or for the happiness they give us. We are chasing for the passion of the chase to keep ourselves occupied, so we don't have to feel the pain of admitting how inadequate we are at contemplation.

Just to challenge my resolve to meditate, horrendous noises are erupting through my open windows from dawn to dusk. The laborers are doing double-time to have everything ready for a spiritual camp. The huts will hold the fifty some-odd people who will arrive in less than two weeks. I look for my ear plugs and find that the mice have chewed them to bits.

While I am questioning my spiritual life, my encounter with the rural life is continuing uninterrupted. Mice had a big party in my hut while I was in Kottagiri. Mouse droppings and pee, a stain impossible to remove, are on several items of clothing, since there are no drawers or cabinets in which to hide them. Their favorite game now is chewing through the strings that hold my mosquito net up, so that it flops on my face in the middle of the night. They quickly find the nuts stashed in my nylon shopping bag. When I come into my room after dark, I can catch one—sometimes two—by quickly zipping up the bag. Then I tote it over to the entrance gate to release. I do not know how many there are, maybe the same ones find their way back here, but it soon becomes obvious that this game could go on forever.

Suddenly, we have electricity, so I can at least turn a light on when I hear a critter. The *ashram* had been wired for power months before I arrived. However, to get the connection here, a bribe to the local official was necessary. Sahaja was holding out, standing on his religious rights, but I think he finally capitulated to the powers that be and paid. This means that I can get up and have a cup of tea using my heating coil first thing in the morning. Otherwise, it has little consequence for me since I still do my studying and proof-reading during the day, and let my eyes rest at night.

One day when I am walking across the extensive grounds, I hear a voice behind me calling, *"Amma, Amma."* I could not imagine that anyone would be calling me "Mother," so I do not even turn to see who is being summoned. You can imagine my surprise when the elderly carpenter crosses over to confront

me with his palms together in the traditional salutation of respect, repeating "*Amma*" again to my face.

When I recover slightly from the shock, enough to smile, I ask him, "Are you okay?" Although he will not understand my words, I think he may sense my sentiment. He demonstrates his plight by making a terrible, hacking cough and pointing to his chest. Obviously, he is asking for my help. I touch his forehead to discern that he does have a fever.

"*Randhi* [come]," I motion for him to follow me. As we go over to my hut, I am puzzling, why in the world did he come to me for help? I have had no contact with this elderly man who does odd jobs around the place. Then I remember that a week ago I gave Jagdish a homeopathic remedy when he had a bad fall. The carpenter must have found out. I do not fail to note that he came to me for homeopathy instead of the Nature Cure route.

Just before I arrived, the *brahmachari* who tends the cows got a nasty cut on his hand. The swami and swaminis were so elated that it healed so fast because of Nature Cure—eight days of fasting. At the time, I questioned them if this was a feasible modality for the villagers who can hardly afford to miss a day's work. Little wonder the carpenter has come to me; he is trying to escape the fasting for eight days! He seems to be okay when I see him two days later. Afterwards, he shows no sign of recognition, as if we had never met. I will eventually come to understand that this modesty is a sign of respect.

During my regular trips back to Bangalore to stay at the Bhavan, I met a nice young man who had recently taken his CPA exams. Since Sahaja is looking for an accountant for the school and Nature Cure Center, I suggest the young man to him. When Sunil comes out for an interview, he has to sleep in the school office without a bed or mosquito net. When asked how he slept the next morning, he mentions the mosquitoes. Swamini Atheetha replies, "Oh, we don't bother about these things—after all we are in an ashram."

Every one of the *swamis* and *swaminis* have a sleeping net, including her, so her statement was a bit off-putting. Not one to keep quiet in the face of abject falsehood, I pipe in, "He's here to apply for the accountant job, not to be a *swami*."

There have been several such incidents; I am on the verge of making a negative judgment about the whole crew. These were not the type of ideas I had in mind when I said I wanted to experience the world from another mindset!

The young man did take the job, but arranged to rent a house in the near-by village, modestly furnished, for 300 *rupees* a month. He tells me the village has many empty houses because the owners are working in the city, saving their village homes for retirement.

Although he seemed very reserved at the Bhavan, somehow in this new setting, he has found himself and turned into an expert on any and all projects. I see him one day showing the boy who waters the trees how to do it properly. He is explaining, if they were to build a dike in a circle around trunks, the water would stay around the tree, instead of running down the road. As he demonstrates, a group of onlookers gathers. However, the lesson is broken up when the *swamini* in charge of agriculture comes out to inform him that this is the only time the boy has to water; further, if he is disturbed he will not be able to complete his work. It is really a stitch seeing an Indian trying to tell another how to do things nicely—and he got just as far as I have.

Before the camp convened, a nice gentleman arrived for a two week retreat. He is a regular guest, but evidently he does not participate in meditation, for the morning bell remains silent. Since he is really the only one on the premises who speaks English, on a couple of mornings he joins me for my morning walk. We pass some villagers; as usual, I give them a quick hello and pass. However, Mr. RamaSwami understands their Tamil. "They are talking about the *ashram* having a bus and a TV."

"How could they know? The bus just arrived yesterday, and the TV is inside a building."

"Oh, they'll know everything that happens. A couple of the workers at the *ashram* are local folk from the village."

"I see."

"Sure, they keep up with what's going on. They resent that the school is being built to bus in paying students from Hosur [the nearest town]. And none of them will ever be able to use the Nature Cure center."

"I see their point, yet I'm not sure they would want to use the school or the center, if it were available to them. In general, I've heard the Tamil villager is not particularly open to change."

"Yes, but we should give them the opportunity."

"I just can't say. I do not know Sahaja's motives. I understood when he was in Coimbature he had a school for the local children, probably a trade school. I just don't understand why he has changed so much."

One morning on the outskirts of a neat village of less than 100 residents, we encounter a friendly, young man working in the fields. He strikes up a conversation with Mr. RamaSwami. Of course, he knows we are from the *ashram*. "Those *swamis* just want to make money, so they can enjoy themselves," was his succinct analysis of the situation.

He goes on to tell us that he had been studying chemistry in the university in Bangalore. However, the family funds ran out when his older brother lost his job in a motorcycle factory. Frankly, he appears quite dejected that he now has to be home taking care of the family land. I encourage him to visit the Gandhi Village when they get it started. He will learn a lot of natural farming techniques, as well as be able to take advantage of their seed bank.



Local farmer trashing rice

As Mr. RamaSwami and I converse from one subject to another, we hit on a couple of interesting tidbits. First, a personal note: Mr. RamaSwami's family is from the Salem area. Seeking employment during the British Empire era, his father had moved to Burma to work for a British bank. His salary, sent home monthly, supported a joint family: his wife and children, plus a brother and his wife and an unmarried sister. When Burma became involved in World War II, the checks quit coming. From Salem, a tiny town in the middle of Tamil Nadu, his family tried to make inquiries about the father. However, they never got

any assistance in finding him. To this day, they have no idea what happened to him.

On another subject, he informs me that he has Indian friends in U.S. have told him that he can go there to live. In only a short time, he can become eligible for Social Security, then return to India and receive checks. To put it mildly, I am surprised. Instead of over-reacting and stating my opinion as I normally would, I feign idle curiosity and ask him a few pointed questions. Does he specifically know anyone who has done so? Is there a possibility that the Indians in U.S. are trying to take advantage of their fellow compatriot? In other words, how would he live once he got to America?

I do keep my mouth shut about two cases I know of in which wealthy Indians are taking advantage of U. S. Social Security, so I remain ambivalent. However, I warn him that he should be cautious in attempting any such scam. After assuring me he's not interested anyway, he makes a point to give me some financial advice: "Whatever you do, do not let that *swami* get his hands on your money. You will be stuck here."

Everyone is getting ready for the camp, but there is an advantage. Sahaja told me that he will be "revising" the texts that will be given by the *swaminis*. First thing on the appointed morning, I go over to the meditation hall, prepared to begin study of one of the traditional Sanskrit texts. When I enter, he has not started yet, so I take a moment to explain to him the difference in the British and American word "revise." To us, what he means is that he will be "reviewing" the texts. As it turns out, the classes are to be in Tamil, so, for me, it doesn't matter whether he is revising or reviewing.

A few days later, the buildings are ready and the participants begin to arrive. I only attend the morning meditation, so I am in my room the remainder of the time. I am looking forward to the peace and quiet. Not yet... Many people arrived in cars, bringing with them drivers who are not interested in spiritual classes. The shade of the cherry tree beside my hut is a handy place for them to gather, chat, and play their radios.

Continually, I am fascinated by my attempt to look at the world from a different mind set. How would the world appear if I had entirely different ideas about it? However, I suspect I shall remain stuck in my concept that we have to treat others equally and fairly. I don't think I'm going to get past this typically American hang-up.

A young woman came back with us from Kottagiri to be in charge of the kitchen, the store room and the ordering of food, particularly during the camp. I am surprised to note that Parvati speaks a decent level of English. Because of her English, Sahaja promised her a teaching position in the school when it opens in September. Two weeks into her stay, it becomes apparent that she falls into the exploited group. Her first responsibility is to get the large store room organized. Her exact words are "if you could see the condition of the grains and beans, you would run away from here and never return." When the camp begins, she is in the kitchen from before sunup until past sundown. She confides in me that the *swaminis* seem to be making it very difficult for her.

In Kottagiri, Poppy, the cook at the retreat center, had warned her not to come. Poppy was a local woman with a delightful face that I will always remember. She had found her place in life as the cook at the local *ashram* where we stayed. She lived totally from her sense of self; I can assure you she tolerated no crap from any man.

"That *swami* is a jungly fellow," were her exact words to Parvati. When she tells me of Poppy's words, I am puzzled. Poppy was hardly the type to bother with others, much less criticize them—and a *swami* at that. No one criticizes a *swami*. We wonder what Poppy knows that we do not.

Since Nature Cure a la Sahaja emphasizes raw food, we have at least one selection each meal. I help several women chop the raw vegetables each day for the fifty participants. Raw banana stalk, available from the garden, is my favorite; I love it. However, the stalks have to be young and tender to be edible. We also eat banana flowers; Usha had cooked several great dishes with them too. They require careful preparation because the tough, bitter stamen has to be removed from each flower.

To encourage the eating of raw foods, which is totally adverse to the Indian diet, one afternoon Sahaja gives the participants a demonstration of preparing raw vegetable salads. As he finishes, he turns to me and informs everyone that he will be going to America with his raw foods.

“But Sahaja, Americans eat salads already. It’s the Indians who eat only cooked food.” Why do I always fall into the trap of interjecting some simple logic? No sooner have the words fallen from my lips do I know that I should have remained silent.

“But my method is much better.”

“You add grated coconut, which has gotten a lot of bad press for its cholesterol. And the Americans will never go for those green chilies that you put in.”

“They are just for taste.”

“Not for the American taste. Anyway, they are not considered healthy. The homeopathic doctor in Bangalore told me that no one should eat green chilies.”

“Well, we could eliminate the chilies and the coconut, I suppose.”

I wanted to say, “Then you would just have the salads that we eat anyway,” but I knew it would fall on deaf ears. This is not a place to interject logic. The Greeks may have gotten their esoteric logic from the sages of Bharata, but I am becoming more and more convinced that logic in practical matters is surely a development unique to the West.

On the last day of the retreat, several people plan an entertaining program, including several skits. Parvati gets a couple of the camp participants to help her with one and solicits me to help with costumes. The crux of it is an imitation of Swamini Atheetha and Sahaja—all in Tamil, so I do not really know what is going on. However, it is obvious that both the *swamis* do not like the spoof. Afterwards, I ask Parvati what she said that made them so mad, but she insists that she does not know. The only English-speaking couple agrees with her that the skit was just in fun.

Parvati and I decide that we have outlived our usefulness at the *ashram*, or vice versa. I will not even have to worry about Jagdish’s fate. He has moved to Hosur to live with a young couple who came to the camp. He will be a carpenter’s apprentice in their furniture shop. So Parvati and I plan our escape. Tomorrow all the camp participants will depart, so we can leave quietly the following day without making any spectacle.

It’s late, but I go out for a long, moonlit stroll. The storm clouds are so thin the reflected moonlight shines through them to cast a haze over the leaves in the banana grove. The dark waters of the lake glisten in the background. Reminiscing over the past month, I smile as I acknowledge that I have certainly experienced rural India. And I was expecting more. I was really counting on having a daily group meditation and classes on the traditional texts. A real issue is that I feel isolated from the wonderful spiritual traditions, sages, and holy places that abound here. I may as well be back in San Francisco. Maybe it’s just that there is no singing and dancing here! Meditation, study, service project, singing and dancing—that’s what I wanted.

A cool breeze blows across my face. I feel at peace in this quiet beauty. Although at times I have felt distraught because of certain situations, nature has never let me down. It’s been a thread to bring me back to center again and again. I sigh as I take in the vitality from the beauty of the starlit sky. Mentally, I bid this place *adieu*.

First thing in the morning, Parvati goes to the office to tell Sahaja that she will be leaving. He doesn’t question her, and just says, “That’s fine.” He knows she does not have any money, nor does he offer her a single *paisa* (penny) for her transportation home or the three weeks of work from 12 to 16 hours a day. “Top pay” must be subject to his interpretation. Then she leaves her small bag with me and goes out to

the highway and over to the village to find a taxi to send over to pick up me and my baggage.

When the taxi arrives at my cottage, I start to load one of my three suitcases into it. At just that moment, Sahaja happens to be strolling down the lane. Seeing the taxi, he comes over to investigate.

“What’s going on here?”

“I’m heading out. I was going to come by your office to tell you good-bye.”

“No, you stay. What difference does it make to you if there is a little lovemaking going on here?”

Fortunately, I am bending over to close my bag because I am sure a confounded look crosses my face. The phase quickly passes as I realize: that one comment sure explains a lot.

“Look, I don’t care what any of you do. However, it’s obvious this is not the place for me. Everything I do is 180 degrees out of phase with the way you guys want things.”

“How did you know?”

“Your reactions are quite obvious.”

The driver helps me load the last, and biggest, suitcase, then we drive over the nearby village to pickup Parvati and head back to the city.

Chapter Twelve

Life in the Garden City

When we reach Bangalore, we go straight to the Aurobindo Bhavan. Even if Bangalore is losing reputation as "the garden city," certainly this area is holding its own with its broad spreading trees and large lake. The manager is always happy for the extra income: 25 *rupees* per day. After we get settled, the first task is to find a bus to Kottagiri for Parvati. As it turns out, Vani, the American at the Bhavan, has just returned from there by bus—two times—so she knows the ropes. Two trips were necessary because she packs around so much stuff, including a kerosene stove so she won't have to eat out, that it is impossible to handle it all in one journey. The buses to Kottagiri are private lines; therefore, they leave from some unnamed back street.

In the meantime, I hear Parvati's story. She knows English so well because she had lived and worked outside London as a nurse maid for the children of an heiress reputed to be India's richest woman. A widow, who inherited a huge fortune, mostly in tea, owned plantations in Kottagiri and had met Parvati there. Parvati, like all such household help in London, was paid about one-fifth the normal wage for domestic help in London; even so it was good money for Parvati. The agreement was that the woman would be making a monthly deposit in a savings account in Parvati's name. After two years when Parvati wanted to return home, her boss refused to release the savings and her passport.

Fortunately, Parvati spoke enough English and was smart enough to find an attorney. He was able to get her passport returned along with her ticket to India, for the Government requires the return transportation. However, he was not able to recoup her back wages. However, the kind lawyer was able to find Parvati a job with another lady during the litigation period of almost three months. Therefore, she was able to earn a little money to bring back to show for her two years of work. She assures me that there are hundreds of poor uneducated Indian women trapped in England today under the same circumstances, but they are too intimidated to approach an attorney. Besides, the majority cannot speak a word of English. I recently read of a similar story of a young woman who went to U.S. This exploitation is not traditional; when a Greek historian wrote of Bharata 2,000 years ago, he specifically commented he never saw a single slave in all of his travels. He was quite impressed.

The timing of my return is perfect as Usha is here for two days to celebrate Akshay's birthday. Of course, she gets a great laugh over my experience at Sahaja's *ashram*. "Nancy, you are supposed to be the worldly-wise American. How could you be so naive?" she teases me. "I don't know which is funnier; your innocence or his giving himself away."

Through my correspondence with her, Swami Sahajananda had offered Usha the job as headmistress of their new school, scheduled to open in September. She had not bothered to arrange an interview because Hari had warned her, "Don't waste your time going out there. Those three *swaminis* will never let you do things the way you want to." He was certainly perceptive on that score, and he had only met them once.

I love seeing Usha and Hari together. They are both such special people. Although I know them well enough to perceive their personal differences, which have made their marriage difficult, I will always feel that if the outer world had been more caring, they could have contributed something special to their world. I am not one to dismiss others' hardships with a "it's just their *karma*." In their case, it is easy to perceive if their families had been kinder to them, they would not have to be just struggling for survival.

A priority is taking care of a filling that I broke while chewing on some peanut brittle—that I had bought for Jagdish. I checked out a dentist in a modern building that I pass on my daily walks to the library. I find him quite competent with an office equipped with all the latest dental apparatus, imported from Japan. He quotes me a very low price for a platinum crown. His office is so busy that he even talks on his cordless phone at the same time he is working on a patient's teeth. However, he does take time to inform me that "you people" are more prone to cavities than the Asians.

While I am waiting in his office after the initial examination, he escorts another gentleman into his office to wait. I immediately strike up a conversation with the handsome, elderly man. He tells me that, although he spent his adult life in France, he was originally from Coorg. I know very little of Coorg, as it lies in an isolated pocket in the mountains of south Karnataka. Apparently, it is not isolated enough though. For when I ask the gentleman something about the region, he gives me an interesting description of progress in the outback.

"Oh, nothing is the same there now. When I was a boy, before the missionaries arrived, it was such a beautiful place. All the women had the most beautiful breasts; they all went topless, of course. Since their breasts were exposed, they kept them up with massage and oils. Then, because of the puritans, they were made to cover everything. Now they don't pay any attention to their breasts and just let them hang. It's such a shame," his lamentation is quite sincere.

"But the Brits had you Indians fooled. It was not just for their Puritan values that they wanted you covered. Lets face it, except for a very few, the Brits in India had no religious motives whatsoever. The goal of the Empire was to put cloth manufactured in Manchester on the back of every human being. The government made it clear, even to the missionaries, that this was their solemn duty."

"Well, it is certainly true that the Empire was about economy. The poor, impoverished India that we know today is what the British left, not what they found here."

I see Hari almost daily. He is a great source of information and has directed me to all the major libraries with collections in English. Typical of Indian cities, spiritual discourses are given by a scholar or *swami* somewhere every night. Each of the vernacular languages has its own spiritual texts and literary works. They are usually interwoven, since most Hindu language, art and literature are based on a spiritual life. The word for "god" in Tamil literally means: "the source within." However, I am fortunate that in the cities there are always *swamis* who lecture in English. Of course, Hari knows everything that's going on, so we hop on his motor scooter and wheel around town.

One evening we go to hear Swami Ishwarananda Giri from Mt. Abu, who gives an interesting lecture on creativity. He explains that when we give a child a pencil, he will simply want to express. However, we will not leave him in a creative mode, but force him into purposeful activity with comments like: "What is that?" "Why did you draw that?" "What is it for?" "Why don't you draw this?" He maintains that in creative, expressive beauty, the mind remains quiet, without movement. In purposeful, planned activity, the mind follows desire: the desire to please the parents and teachers in the case of the child. Naturalness comes from abandonment, no purpose. Whereas, my first response is "what am I supposed to do?"

When I have an opportunity after the lecture, I ask him, "How do we distinguish between expressive, spontaneous action that is truly creative, and one which is simply impulsive? Can't we fool ourselves?"

"The impulsive lacks the elevating and beautiful qualities that we find in creative inspiration. Creative activity is characterized by intense concentration preceding it, and a flash of rapport succeeding it."

Hari also took me to visit a study group of some retired businessmen. Studying the scriptures is a common pastime for the retired, especially high-caste, men. I have never encountered so many bright-eyed, intelligent, dignified gentlemen over 70 years of age in all of my travels through U.S and Europe combined, as I have in my short time in India. There are no dirty old men, no sexy senior citizens, no off-color jokes, no depravity. A religion and culture that can produce such dignified *gentle-men* must have

truly something of value.

Anyway, among the group is a very special person; “the cartman” he is nicknamed. The cartman is a retired director of a highly regarded I.C.C. Engineering College. After retirement, he has dedicated his time to the cause of developing an oxen yoke from a synthetic material that is lighter than wood; therefore, more humane. In addition, it would have practical value too. Since the animals will not tire as easily, they can work longer. The biggest obstacle is financial. The local farmer just does not have funds to buy a new yoke for the sake of his animals. The cartman has approached the state government of Karnataka with the idea that they could purchase several of his yokes as a trial.

Finally, after months of waiting, he received a call from the Karnataka state agricultural department for an order. He was quite elated, and asked about the delivery date. “Delivery date? What delivery? We don’t actually want the yokes,” he was informed. They only wanted a receipt showing purchase of the yokes, so they could account for some funds paid out.

Karnataka is said to be of the worse states for corruption. I have had several first-hand—and very frustrated—reports that even the clerks that take the payments for taxes are insisting on a bribe to accept the money and write the receipt. Bribes to get building permits or have electricity installed is institutionalized. Others insist that corruption is so pervasive here that the bus drivers have a business in selling tires. They have regular pit stops where a crew changes the good tires for very old ones, which soon have to be replaced, so they can repeat the process. Reports say they sell them back to the state purchasers, for a cut, of course.

One of the best things about my stay at Sahaja’s was the people I met who were guests. I particularly enjoyed the people who were planning on developing the Gandhi Village. One couple, the Bragarias, was young and liberal, so we hit it off right away. When I told them about my writing and editing, they volunteered that they had several computers in their office. I remain very appreciative of this assistance.

So working on the next magazine issue is quite convenient. The Bragarias’ office is only a 10-minute walk from the Bhavan. One day when I arrive, they are anxiously awaiting me. They need my assistance. Mr. Bragaria has to be out of town, on a business trip to Switzerland, at the very time that his wife is receiving a male house guest. The friend from U.S. is a former classmate from her student days when she received her doctorate in chemistry. The catch is that she cannot have a male house guest when her husband is not in the house, even though live-in servants would be present. They came with the plan that I can transfer over to their house to be the official chaperon, then I will be welcome to stay until I leave on my next adventure in a couple of weeks. I had already asked them if I could store my extra suitcases at their home while I was traveling, and I am using their computer, so this small favor seemed inane enough.

However, there is one catch that I never thought of. They live out in the suburbs, so I can no longer walk to the office and library. I become dependent on Indian buses; no schedules, of course. I leave the house early, so I usually get a seat, but the bus is crowded by the time we arrive in town. There is not much natural scenery, so I entertain myself with watching the Indian women drag their beautiful saris down the aisles to clean the floor. One beauty, with her long wool shawl thrown with an air of abandon over one shoulder, drags the end over the steps as she steps out of the bus. Individual acts of public service, for I suspect this is the only sweeping the buses ever get.

When the husband arrives home from his trip, the dinner hour gets later and later as he extends his cocktail hour. Since we usually have *tiffin* at 5:30 p.m. or so, the snack becomes my dinner. Otherwise, I am forced to be up until midnight when dinner is over. Since I leave the house by 6:00 a.m., I have to be in bed at a decent hour. When I make an effort to cook something special, like grilled cheese sandwiches, for *tiffin,* Bragaria remains in his room. He has many sides, and certainly can be a congenial host. However, he sometimes falls into making into subtle barbs.

“How’s your spirituality going,” he queries me one day with a smirk.

"How does one measure spiritual evolution? To me it seems to be a process and we just keep going with it. Anyway, the one and only reason I'm in the city is to work on the magazine. So my only goal is to finish this issue."

Then I make a big mistake. In a friendly conversation with several guests, I happen to mention that Mrs. Bragaria is independent. Well, she had received her doctorate in chemistry in U.S. prior to marriage. For some reason, the husband jumped on me in such a rude manner that was quite embarrassing. I had no idea what I had done wrong, so just kept silent. He even told me I could just get out of the house if I were going to talk that way. What in the world did I say?

I really want to escape, but, somehow I manage to make it through dinner, then I sit down and say to myself, "What is this all about?" I have been attacked before, so part of it is a charge from repeated past history. But isn't it really the search for security, comfort, certainty. How can there ever be security in a changing, impermanent reality? Somehow, I have to accept the insecurity, discomfort and uncertainty of every moment. I sit in uncertainty as a big circle of heat grows in my lower stomach.

The next day the heat and discomfort are still there. I am just moving from stored up memory. I feel like when you have a hundred things to do, but you don't do anything because you just don't know where to start. I walk down the street, almost in a daze, with no interest in my surrounding environment. I would say we must have to go through this long socializing process, so that when we get the life-shocks, we are competent to go on functioning. Even though we may spend a lifetime building up walls of security, uncertainty is always there.

Actually, I feel my lesson to be learned now is hanging out with my discomfort. Then I pick up a Krishnamurti book and just open it randomly to any page. I read his words explaining that while we are really in a search for certainty, while we call it a spiritual pursuit. Further, he alleges that spiritual goals cannot be reached with certainty in our lives.

As it turns out, although Bragaria considers himself totally westernized since he has lived in both U. S. and Europe, he thinks "independent" means living separately. Therefore, he thought I was saying that his wife should be living separately from him. This interpretation hardly fit in the context, but we all hang different meanings on words.

I just keep doing what I have to do; soon enough, the issue on Subramanya, Ganesha's older brother is edited and my introductory article is completed. I will share it because it illustrates an important aspect of the Hindu pantheon of deities. Bharata has always been a land of diverse cultures that had distinct names for their deities. When they came together, they did not look for the differences, but the similarities. Therefore, Subramanya in the North, Muruga in the South, and Skanda from somewhere in between are all considered one and the same deity.

Subramanya

Everyone can appreciate we have had religious philosophers on the planet who have espoused great ideals of the divine heritage of humanity in such maxims as "That [Infinite] thou art" and "the Kingdom of Heaven is within." Appreciate, yes, but are the ideas useful in a world that leaves individuals no leisure to sit back and contemplate the great mysteries of the universe?

A uniqueness of the Vedic *rshis* [sages] is that they have contributed methods by which the theoretical Eternal Reality can be useful in a social reality. Then there were the instructions to the wise kings by their *Brahman* ministers who were responsible to see that each member of the community produced according to his talents, and received according to his needs. Further, the duties within the family group ensured a firm foundation for the development and security of the individuals. It is noteworthy that at each level—the country, the community and the family—the ideal was of mutual cooperation, never of competition.

Fundamental Ideal: The break-up of the small, manageable economic unit during the recent past of

India’s history has eliminated the concept of community support, while the fundamental ideal of the support through cooperation of the gods and the family remains undisturbed. Fortunately, the *rshis,* in their wisdom, had given several legs to the support system, so that although one failed, the others remained.

The influence from the West has not unplugged the circuit to the gods nor to the fathers here. Even the most indifferent student runs to the temple with a coconut before exams. Why? A faith in the cooperation between humans and gods. A son knowingly overshoots his budget when buying a new car. Why? He depends on the mutual cooperation between father and son.

So while living a life of exemplary discipline themselves, the *rshis* have allowed that humans should experience their full share of pleasure in the world. However, a moment will arrive when one be satiated, therefore, ready to forsake the outgoing path of the world for the inward journey. Therefore, religion must have two branches: injunctions for getting along in the world of time, and insights for getting out of the world to That beyond time. To accomplish the first passage in life, the seers gave certain aids to remind us that the life of the senses is not the ultimate goal in life. These aids, presented in the form of divine deities, are pointers by which one can come to the Truth, or at least begin to look in that direction.

Many Forms: No Hindu deity enjoys more divine lineage, or more earthly duties, than Subramanya. He can claim direct parentage of such major deities as Lord Shiva, Agni [Lord Fire], Parvati [Shiva’s wife], Ganga and Himavan [Lord of the Mountains].

As if Subramanya has to please the wishes of all these great progenitors, he appears in many roles to satisfy the needs of the world of both gods and humans. As Skanda, God of War, he crushes the evil forces, both external and internal. When in the form of the Divine Child, Subramanya invokes the internal purity inherent in humanity. As Muruga, God of Love, he bestows grace on gods and humans alike. Appearing as the Guru of Wisdom, he imparts the eternal knowledge. On occasion, he is even extolled as the benefactor of thieves and robbers. So the seers portrayed him as one who is all things to all people.

Skanda, the God of War: In most of the *Puranas,* Skanda has prominence as a warrior. In the various stories, his birth was a response to the need of the deities for a commander-in-chief of their forces. At this particular time in history, Shiva, the traditional General, was occupied with various other endeavors. The epics state that he had been copulating with Parvati for over a month and everyone was afraid to disturb him. The key, in some of the accounts, was that a demon, Asura Taraka, had to be killed by a child. Therefore, Skanda plays the role of the child hero; a familiar theme in the Greek tradition in which Apollo, Hermes, and Zeus all began their careers as a child hero. They continued to maintain an identity with the child-image even when they matured into wise old men.

The *Skanda Purana* recounts the battle of the holy war of the forces of light and darkness. The six-day battle before victory on the seventh represents the advancement each individual must go through before he wins the holy war within his own soul. With his powerful celestial spear, Skanda is not only able to destroy the demons of selfishness and greed, but also able to pierce the pride of the hard-hearted intellectuals.

Muruga, the God of Love: The Vedic *Upanisads* are intellectual treatises that point to the Abstract. In contrast, in Tamil Nadu worship is expressly for the purpose of transcending the normal consciousness, so that one can enter another dimension and connect with the transforming power of the Abstract. Therefore, devotional love is a prominent element expressed in literary form as poems and songs to court the gods. Muruga has been a favorite and is usually portrayed as having two wives through whom his bliss and love are made manifest.
The Tamils have also added the dimension of associating this deity with the splendid expressions of nature in the lush, tropical settings of the South. Under the cathedral of the spreading banyan tree, in the rippling song of a river, in the aspiring heights of the mountain crests—the play of Muruga is extolled in lyrical poetry and song.

These songs, accompanied by various musical instruments, become the background for a spontaneous form of worship. The music is blended with ecstatic dancing to invite possession by the Deity. When the Divine descends, the worshipper or priest goes into a trance and is often able to perform miraculous healings.

Subramanya, the Divine Child: The image of a Divine Child, as a personification of pristine purity and perfection, is present in many religions. The child is begotten in a supernatural manner with direct intervention of the gods. In the case of Subramanya, he was born from the waters (Ganga), which represent depth of consciousness. He was parented by fire (Agni), the sentience in all things, but with the semen of Lord Shiva. The Divine Child neither ages nor dies, but remains untouched by time. He is frequently associated with an animal, a symbol of his integration with the life of the earth. Often he uses the animal as a vehicle for his travels as an intercessory between gods and man.

One may wonder whether the human tendency to idealize a child deity is a vestigial memory of our own childhood; that is, a golden age when the grass was greener, mangoes sweeter, mountains higher, and desires easier to fulfill. Since the Divine Child is super-human, others, including Carl Jung, rationalize that the idealization may be a remembrance of the pre-conscious, or childhood aspect of the collective psyche.

For whatever reason, we can personally experience that the sight of a Divine Child evokes the qualities of love, compassion and purity in ourselves—a return to innocence. In our daily lives of hustle and bustle, it does seem that we could reserve five minutes daily to return to this innocent state. In those moments, we can reaffirm that we are innocent of everything that we are doing or have done; we are innocent of all our failures or successes; innocent of all the conformities that our parents, families or societies have imposed upon us. We can surely touch that inherent innocence—it's not that far away.

In case one finds this exercise difficult, the *rshis* have provided the image for us in the form of Subramanya/Muruga. For, the ideal is that the Divine Child is to be born in us. When it happens we will truly understand what is meant by a spiritual birth—an immaculate conception in a pure heart that lifts the soul to immortality.

Chapter Thirteen

Settling into Another Reality

My next stop is Hampi, a wonderful historical site from the Vijayanagar Empire. I was there in 1979, en route from Bombay to Kerala. At that time, someone had told me that the great Kanchi Sankaracharya, one of India's most respected spiritual teachers, was here on a *pada yatra*, pilgrimage on foot. In fact, I was able to meet the *Acharya* (teacher) when he camped in Hampi. Everyone thought he was in his last days then, but he lived another twenty years. He lived to be over one hundred years old.

However, the event that remained in my mind from that trip to Hampi was the night I spent at a Jain ashram. There I encountered a Jain woman saint and several nuns. Although I know very little about Jainism, these four women appeared to be living an authentic spiritual life. Hampi is rural India personified, so I will be in a spiritual and rural environment to further my observances, as well as continue with my daily meditation. It's a perfect time to return there now because Hampi is quite convenient to Bangalore. After I drop a packet of editing in the mail "speed-post," I head for the site of India's last indigenous empire.

Because of a five-hour wait for a bus to make a 30-minute ride, I arrive at Hampi about 2:00 p.m. Yesterday I arrived late in Hospet late in the afternoon so I spent the night. I conjectured that I could catch an early bus to be able to arrive at the ashram conveniently at an early hour. However, no early bus was available. No one seemed to know when the buses come or go, they just waited without complaint.

About noon, I lunched on a couple of bananas and a packet of biscuits; the usual fare found at a bus station. Actually, one bus arrived about 11:00 a.m. bound for Hampi, but it was so crowded that I would have had to ride on the roof. A kind gentleman advised me that another bus would be coming soon and it should not be so crowded. But it was as it should not be. Taking pity on me, a couple of experienced locals pushed me on the 1:00 p.m. bus. Away I went, standing with my suitcase between my legs.

S lowly, I huff and puff, following the dirt road up a rocky hill with the sun burning down on the back of my neck. The *ashram* must be just around the curve. No, not this one, there's another incline and another curve up ahead, I sigh. As I struggle around the next bend, I am confronted with a landscape of stone buildings, like army barracks. "Hello, hello," I call out, but I receive no reply. Then I realize they are all deserted. Not a single person is to be seen—all remains silent and empty. Using my suitcase for a seat, I rest for a moment. Then gathering my last bit of energy, I haul it over to store under an open stairway, so that I can go on ahead to investigate.

I continue up the hill and around another curve. I see absolutely nothing familiar. Yet this must be the place, for the directions I received to the Jain ashram were precise. Besides, it is the only ashram on this side of the road; I remember that much from my previous visit. At last, I approach a large iron gate with a prominent arch overhead. I spot one small boy in the courtyard, but he does not reply to my question. However, upon seeing me, he takes off; to find someone, I suppose. Meanwhile, I turn back to retrieve my suitcase, not realizing that it is totally safe.

Prakash comes running after me. His English is limited, but adequate for the occasion. "Hello. . . Hello."

"Is this where the Jain Mataji lives?"I inquire.

"Yes."

“I met her here in 1979, but the place has really changed, I don’t recognize anything.”

The many buildings have turned the lovely hillside into a concrete jungle. To make matters worse, all the left-over building materials have been dumped along the roadside in ugly heaps of rubble. I stumble over some loose bricks as we turn to retrieve my suitcase.

“No management,” Prakash declares, with the typical whirling of the hand, the gesture of the south Indians that means “no, nothing.”

Surely, I have witnessed a portent of things to come. In my travels, I have found that life in an ashram is as distinct as the personalities of the preceptor of the ashram. This one will be no exception.

After we lug my suitcase up the hill and back into the courtyard, Prakash leads me down a long cool passageway. There I find the Mataji sitting on an Indian bed with two large dogs by her side. I explain to her, and the small group sitting around her, that I had stayed here over night in 1979.

At that time, the Mataji had given me a real boost in a meditation. She had asked me to repeat a mantra with her that created something like a vortex, which I felt as I was about to disappear into. But I held back because I did not want to miss the one and only bus out of Hampi that day, or I would have missed my connecting bus and train. I will not attempt to justify that decision. I am sure there was also an issue of lack of trust, since I had just met her.

Obviously, I remembered the encounter and wanted to check her out. However, she was not the only influence that urged me to come back to this place. When I was here before, I met three wandering Jain nuns. They were exceptional women in every respect. They were just beginning a pilgrimage across south India, begging their food, and staying in *chaudris*, or temple shelters. They had invited me to join them. I was quite interested in doing so, but the time just was not right for me. Again, I now hoped to meet these three nuns, or learn something about them.
The Mataji does not recall my previous visit, but everyone agrees that she must be the same Mataji I had met here before. I explain to her that I have been staying in different ashrams, usually for one month, so that I am able to settle into the ashram routine and meditation practice. She agrees (through a translator) that it would be fine for me to stay here for one month.

As I am rearranging myself to sit more comfortably on the floor, I put my hand on her iron bed to steady myself. One of the dogs growls ferociously and the other immediately joins in the fray.
“Don’t touch!” chimes a female voice. I do not know if she is referring to the Mataji, the dogs, or, surely not, the bed, but I sure kept my hand to myself after that.

Ordinarily the Mataji closes her doors right after lunch for her afternoon rest, but today she has guests from Gujurat. After ten minutes, everyone adjourns to their quarters for a rest. As we are leaving, Jyothi, a charming young woman, introduces herself. She shows me to the ladies’ hostel, hands me a straw mat, and tells to pick a spot on the stone floor. As permanent residents, Jyothi and Lakshmi, an elderly woman, have one side of the room, while I join the two Gujurati guests on the other end. The hostel is one huge room with ample windows, giving plenty of light and fresh air.

I never need an alarm clock, for Lakshmi is awake and banging stainless steel utensils before sunrise. There may be some method in her madness, but it continues to amaze me that the utensils are not scarred. Although she washes her dishes after each meal, they are all rewashed in this ritual to start the day afresh. She has to hand-carry buckets of water from an outside faucet for the dish washing and to fill her large water pots for the day’s cooking. The loud banging of the door fills in the gaps between the pot banging. She attacks the duty with a vengeance that leaves one in awe of her stamina at sixty-five years of age. By 6:00 a.m. that task is over and she starts sweeping the floor with the same fervor.

Even with the noise of the pans and doors, plus the hardness of the stone floor (fortunately, I brought my thinsulite backpacking pad with me), I still have to give my body a nudge to get it to vacate its warm spot and to start moving. First, I plug in the heating coil to boil water for tea. By the time I have finished in the bathroom, the tea is steeped. While sipping the black, bitter liquid, I quickly dress and run a comb

through my wet hair. I land in the meditation cave sometime between 5:45 and 6:15 a.m.

This cave was the meditation place of Mataji's guru. She had her living quarters built right up beside it, so you have to walk down a hallway beside the cave to get to Mataji's room. The cave is warm, usually quiet and peaceful. Except any time I get into a half-way tranquil state, the hallway doors slam, which gives my nerves a real grating. The entrance doors stick in such a way that one has to be pushed and the other pulled to open them properly. I figured out this combination on the second day, but others who have been here for years remain content to beat the doors like hell to get them open. On the other hand, I have at least five mosquitoes circling and dive-bombing me at any given moment. *There goes the peace I thought I was experiencing,* I have to smile. The Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree for weeks in this same India—how did he ever do it?

Each morning, I sit on my little carpet square until the Mataji comes in about 7:00 a.m. I figure I may not be achieving anything sitting quietly in meditation, but at least I am not contributing to the chaos of world for this one hour of the day. Others, including Jyothi and Lakshmi, arrive to join the Mataji as she performs the ritual worship of the marble statue of her guru and the little marble idol of Chandra Prabhu, the eighth sage of the Jain lineage. In temples in the South, the idol is often black, representing the dark, mysterious, inconceivable. Here the idols are of white marble, which is common in the North. The ones here are of men, not gods. To allay any misunderstanding, I follow the everyone with palms together as we pay respect to each statue. Then everyone gets on the floor to bow to Chandra Prabhu. I am really working on changing my mindset about all the Indian bowing. The Indians bow reverently to anything—everything. How many have even bowed and touched my feet?

Yet, it is quite an ego crusher for me to bow to a piece of stone. It's the attitude that counts, I remind myself. Everyone bows here; even saints bow right down to the ground. When I bow, I reverently bow to that unfathomable mystery that pervades the universe, and to that same mystery within myself. If I had known this Jain saint, I am sure that I would comprehend that he deserved this symbol of respect.

After the ceremony, everyone troops over to the temple for another service. This temple also has been constructed within the past ten years. The Jains, along with the Hindus, have adopted the disarming practice of ringing a bell in the worship service, long and loud. It is intended to get the attention of the deity. I conjecture it would frighten off any deity. Anyway, it certainly would wake up any sleepy-headed worshipers, so it does serve a purpose. Truly, this temple bell is the biggest—and the loudest—in the country. They have achieved the ultimate. I do not know why religious people have to be so competitive about such things—the highest steeple, the largest altar, the loudest bell. Anyway, I am sure it will take my nervous system hours to recuperate. After the first morning, I do not return to the temple, and no one mentions it. Each morning, I head in that direction, following dear crippled Jyothi, as she limps and half-sprints to keep up with Mataji. At the fork in the path, I head over to the ladies' hostel to get myself organized for the day.

After the temple service, everyone reconvenes in the kitchen, just across from the ladies' hostel, for breakfast. I always linger afterward to feed the little sparrows bits of cooked cereal I have saved for them. This is my true vocationdfeeding birds. However, I have been informed that there is no money in it. Nevertheless, I do note that the birds have not bought into the "by the sweat of your brow" system.

When I finish breakfast, I grab my daypack and take off to explore the temple ruins in the vicinity. One morning I decide to take the strenuous route up and over the hill to the Hampi Bazaar, instead of going by the road. As I descend the hill in front of the temple, I am aware of the passage of time. The granite steps have been worn smooth by the many bare feet that have tread this path in the past. Pilgrims traveling from one temple to another, troupes of dancing girls who performed at the temple festivals, mercenary soldiers who guaranteed the safety of rulers. I wonder if the temple elephants tread this path or did they take the longer, easier route along the river?

At one time, shops, homes of nobles and shelters for pilgrims lined the wide road that runs down to the temple. One can only imagine the festive spectacle when the idols went out on festival days in their royal chariots. Now the buildings are a shamble of granite pillars, connected with make-shift thatched roofs.

As I wind my way to the temple bazaar, I pause to attempt to untangle the rope of an ox that has the poor fellow immobilized. It cannot even lower its head to eat. The rope is so tangled in the bushes and with itself that I am making little progress when, suddenly, its owner, who was napping nearby, rouses and yells at me. I guess he thinks I am trying to steal his animal. It would be impossible to explain to him, even if I were to speak his language. He would have no concept that I am concerned for the comfort of an animal. After all, he is sleeping on a chunk of bare granite.

At the intersection of the river road, I stop to buy bananas from a six-year old vendor. He is so small that he is sitting on the cart to be able to reach is produce. He greets his new customer with a smile and appears even happier to have the opportunity to practice his English.

“Three bananas, one rupee,” he tells me with a chirpy voice.

“I’ll take six.”

“Six,”he repeats thoughtfully.

“Yes, six. So two rupees,” I help him out.

“Yes, two rupees,” he smiles after a pause to check the calculations on his fingers.

He takes his hooked machete and slices a carefully counted six bananas off the stalk. After recounting them, he hands them to me.

“Six,” he verifies with a smile at his successful transaction.

I stick them in my shopping bag and continue toward the temple. Just down the road, the wide dirt shoulder serves as the dooryard, chicken pen, cow stall and playground for the dwellings lined along it. For the last block, a row of decent buildings, used for shops and homes, border the route to the temple. As I approach the crossroads, I spot the toothless fruit seller, but not before she spots me. She is waving at me and motioning to me to come over to her street side shop: a burlap bag and one round basket. She hands me one papaya—small and squishy ripe. Here there is a fruit in season nearly every month. Papayas and watermelon are peak in April. May brings the delicious, juicy, sweet mangoes, although you can still get some in June along with the wonderful *chikku*. Then in July the guavas are ready, both the pink and white varieties.

No, not today,” I start to walk away.

She gets up and gestures for me to wait. As she hobbles off the bones of her thin bottom are practically visible through her threadbare yellow *sari*. While I am waiting, I walk over to the nearby green coconut stand. When she comes back, I wave at her, so she will not think I have deserted her. When I return to her burlap bag, I see she has cut up the crummy papaya and is selling it by the slice to a couple of eager young boys. Then she holds up the papaya that she has fetched from her hut. I take it and give it a careful look because the skin looks strange; almost as if it has been frozen—impossible in this heat. And I am positive there is not a single refrigerator in all of Hampi.

“*Pakka* [good, ripe],” she implores when she notes my hesitation.

“*Pakka—nai,*” I express my doubt in my 12-word Hindi vocabulary. She pantomimes cutting it open to show me. I nod in agreement. It is okay, but now we both spot a big overripe bruise.

“*Kitna?*” I inquire, but the boys who paying for the slices have distracted her. She does not hear, or at least does not answer.

“*Kitna?*” prompts the tall, dark lady who is selling roasted peanuts, heaped on a burlap bag, with a rusty tin can for a measurer. She must be afraid the fruit seller will lose her customer.

I get more attention in Hampi than an ordinary foreigner. I experienced this same phenomenon on my first trip here, but now it is quite prevalent. The population here has quadrupled in the last ten years, so there are more people to react. Wherever I go, I hear, "Indira," or "Indira—*kee jay*," [hail to Indira]. The praises tell me two things: Although Indira Gandhi was quite a controversial Prime Minister, the people here must have liked her, and that I vaguely resemble her when I am in a sari. I always wear a simple unbleached cotton one; whereas she always appeared in white, since she was a widow. Also, we both are small women and have streak of gray hair. In other words, I may get a little preferential treatment from these simple, rural folk.

I finally purchase the papaya for four rupees, fair to both of us. Back at the ashram, I share it with Jyothi and the crippled cow with the dangling foot, who gets the piece with the bad spot.
Our lunch is simple fare of rice and dal, which sometimes has a morsel of a vegetable. Since we never have any fruit, I pick up bananas regularly at the Hampi market to share with Jyothi. This poor fare is why Lakshmi always cooks for herself. She gets her groceries from Hospet, so always has plenty of fruit. I would not consider cooking because of the time spent shopping and cooking and carrying buckets of water for washing dishes—there would be no time for anything else. Occasionally, I have a vegetable attack and go over to the Trishul Restaurant to have lunch with the Singhs; they have lots of good vegetables. Since it is off-season here, I get to visit with this lovely couple also.

After lunch everyone at the *ashram* escapes the heat of mid-day and takes a nap. With my early rising and strenuous hiking all morning, I am always ready for a nap. However, the kitchen is directly across from the hostel. The kitchen crew are cleaning up the pots and pans from lunch, producing such banging and clanging that it is impossible to relax, much less sleep. In addition, they are forever fussing and hollering among themselves. At least that's what it sounds like. I cannot say for sure because the Indians are not inclined to speak in low voices under in any circumstance. Every afternoon I have this overwhelming urge to go over and yell at them for yelling. *Now isn't that what makes the world go round?* I censor myself.

Consciously, I let my frustration go; then I walk over and say "*shanti, shanti*" [peace, peace] to them. They only hush for a few minutes; so it is not worth my trouble. One of the helpers is a real screamer. I named her "*Shanti-bai*" [peace-sister] because, as I explained to Jyothi, all her shrieks serve to remind us how nice peace is. Someone must have told her what I said because she now smiles when she sees me.

Anyway, I pull a cotton sheet over my head and hope for the best. At least, I have finally mastered the art of sleeping with my entire head under a cover, same as the people on the streets. Like them, I am forced to do so because of the flies by day, and the mosquitoes by night.

Immediately after my nap, I am off again to explore the many ruins, but I make it a point to be back by 4:30 p.m. when Mataji comes out of her room to feed the monkeys. She has a bag of little sweet bananas and a tin of peanuts in the shell to give them. The monkeys eagerly gather around her for this free hand-out. As they approach her one by one, according to their own pecking order, she carefully doles out the goodies. Usually, they just fuss a bit among themselves—you were first last time—you got more than me—type of behavior. But occasionally, one of them gets aggressive with the Mataji and tries to grab the peanut tin out of her hand. She keeps her cool, and kind of draws back with a chuckle. However, she sensibly keeps her hands covered with a heavy cloth for protection. Only the Rhesus monkeys come for the treats. The Gibbons, with their handsome beards, are around here too, but they always keep their distance, sometimes watching from a nearby roof-top. Mataji says they are impossible to tame.

After the feeding of the monkeys, we go to dinner because Jains are not to eat after the sun has set. Following the usual rice and dal, we gather in the cave to sing *bhajans*, devotional hymns; not one of my favorite pastimes. I would skip it, but Mataji tells me I must come to "*bhakti*," devotion. However, I am relieved that everyone has a soft voice, for often there is a screamer in the group, who just ruins the atmosphere for me. Since the *bhajans* are all in Gujurati, I do not understand a word. They are less repetitive than the Hindu *bhajans*, which make singing them even more difficult for me. I am able to mouth along, reading from a book written in Hindi, the *devagiri* script. Both Sanskrit and Hindi use the

same script. To me they are quite sensible; if you know the alphabet, you can at least pronounce the words correctly.

While everyone regroups over at the temple for the ceremony there, I remain in the cave to use the time for a short meditation. It's a good feeling to settle into a peaceful silence after all my running around during the day. Then everyone troupes into Mataji's room for satsang for an hour maximum. Satsang literally means, hanging out with sat, the Truth, usually with a spiritual teacher; or it can mean simply being in the company *(sangha)* of other sincere seekers. Our conversations always remain in the mundane reality. As far as I can discern nothing is ever mentioned about the Jain religion.

Even though we are free quite early, I never leave the compound after dark. I find that the temple verandah is a nice quite place to sit to enjoy the silence of the night. The stars stud the high horizon of this mountain midnight. Was that the blink of a fire fly or a nod of a shooting star? The moon has already set. Silence breathes deep in the quiet darkness.

After I am settled into my routine, one morning I mention to Prakash that the tea always tastes so terrible. "I wonder what they do to it. Is it really fit to drink?" I question him.

"No management," laments Prakash with his usual hand twirl. "We have no milk for the tea because they will not take the cows to breed. So we only get two and one-half liters of milk a day from six cows, and the dogs get two liters of that. Yet, they pay that herder to come to take the cows to pasture every day."

"The dogs drink all the milk? But they are grown dogs," I comment. My mistake, I should have asked, if this is not milk clouding up the tea, what is it?

But it was too late, Prakash is explaining, "They're only a year old. Mataji had a pet dog for years, but it became quite old and died. She was so overwhelmed she wept for days on end, would not even eat. Everyone was very concerned over her health, so they brought her these two puppies. She got well immediately. Since then she waits on those dogs hand and foot. She even moved to the floor to sleep to give them her bed."

"She sleeps on the floor, so the dogs can sleep on the bed?" It's a silly question; everyone else is sleeping on the floor. Why not the Mataji?

"And anyone who complains about the dogs. . . well, don't try to find out," he advises me further. One morning, I feel like going over to the hillside to catch the sunrise before meditation. A hint of mist still is hovering over the valley when I arrive. Suddenly, the sun appears and throws its glow around mountainside. Its tardy rays brighten the green valleys. Fog lifts from my mind sky. A brown kite forgets its search for food as it rides the rising wind. With a contented smile in my gut, I return to the ashram gates where I receive a jolt.

The big sign at the side of the entrance gate clearly states:
"No loud noise, no spitting, no menstruating ladies."

At this very moment, I am in the throes of my period. I honestly had not seen the sign on the day of my arrival; I do not know what I would have done had I seen it. It is likely I would have proceeded exactly as I have done, since I have no concept that a period renders a woman an untouchable. This is one part of the different mindset that I choose to ignore. However, it has been argued that at least the Indian women got three days off each month. Since there is no garbage collection in these small towns, I have been throwing the tampons on the hillside covered with thorny bushes outside the bathroom window. At least, I have left no evidence. *Well, I will leave in the morning,* I reassure myself, *this place did not turn out to be what I remembered, anyway*.

That night a group of businessmen arrives from Hospet. Obviously, they furnish the money behind the operation. With much effort, they all sit on the floor with us for evening satsang. Their wealth has visibly gone to their stomachs; they have to heave and strain to get up and down. I listen as they have a slightly heated discussion with Mataji, in Gujarati, of course. I am just hanging out, not really paying much

attention.

Suddenly I become aware that they are talking about me. Finally, one of the gentlemen asks me in English when I will be leaving. I tell him that I am planning to leave in the morning. He says that is good because guests are allowed here for three days only. Then he reports it to the others, but Mataji objects. She says that she has given permission for me to stay a month. I sit quietly, but mentally praying very loudly, *God, get me out of here.*

The next morning I go for my usual meditation. After Mataji's rituals, she motions for me to follow her into her little room. Jabbing downward emphatically with her index finger, "You stay!" she states in plain English.

Well, she won the battle with the Gujurati businessmen; no householders lording it over her. Good for the Mataji! Then I realize, *oh dear, but I lost.* I just do not know how I will manage to stay here for a month. *You have lots of incredible ruins to explore,* I console myself.

Chapter Fourteen

Exploring Ruins of Past Glory

Each morning I can't wait to finish breakfast so I can set out to explore the ruins of the surrounding countryside. This area comprises the Hemakuta Hill shelf, an active spiritual center before the establishment of the Vijayanagara Empire in 1336. Several Jain temples on the hill were constructed around the 9th century. An inscription in the main Virupaksha/Shiva temple refers to its construction in 1310. Its large proportions indicate a sizable population of worshipers

Originally, Virupaksha was an indigenous deity associated with the Tungabhadra River that flows beside the temple. The Hindus had their own method of proselytizing—a totally non-violent technique. When they came here, they honored Virupaksha and added his name to their long list of names of Shiva. They sealed the contract by placing Shiva's traditional Nandi, a gigantic bull, at the end of the road.

Vijayanagara: "the place of victory" that became the ruins of hope. It had been a dream made manifest; a Hindu stronghold against the invading Moslems and the atrocities they had a penchant to perpetuate against the Hindu infidels. The city was surrounded by a wall of thick granite blocks, as granite was, and still is, very plentiful here. Every hillock and every valley were ornamented with its own temple. Pilgrims from all over the South came to renew their faith in the gods who had, at least for several centuries, seemed to have forsaken them under the Moslem regime. The beautiful Tungabhadra River that still winds through the valley was harnessed for extensive irrigation works to saturate the fertile soil of the valleys. But the dream did not endure. Now Hampi is an archaeologist's paradise with ruins of temples, palaces, bathing pools, guard towers, and even a ten-stall elephant stable.

Let's face it: kings have always had it good. The archaeologists contend that Solomon's harem was much larger than his temple. While it is true that in Hindu India the most ornate structures were built for the gods, royalty lived well too. Interestingly though, there are no ruins of indigenous palaces before the British era. In around 200 BC, a foreign traveler did write of the ornate luxuries of a Mauryan palace. I assume they built their royal homes of perishable materials, while the gods got the imperishable stone.

One morning I set out to visit the complex of ruins of the royal quarters. I take some fruit and biscuits with me and tell Prakash not to expect me for lunch. I walk even though it is quite a trek, but I can return by bus. I finally reach the crest of the hillock that gives a view of the valley looking toward Kamalapur. Where I stand, the sun is under a cloud, so it casts a veil of subdued light across the granite boulders and old walls of the citadel, accented with deep gray shadows. The topsy-turvy stance of the boulders tells of a violent history; wars, earthquakes, volcanoes. The pounding wind and rain have rounded the edges of those not yet pushed downhill. You have to capture this scene with a wide-angled vision. I have my camera with me, but a photo would just show piles of stone. It cannot capture the expanse, the feeling of being so far, far away, the taste of fresh air against the crumpled ruins of the past.

Excavations were started at this site of the homes of the former monarchs only fifteen years ago. The most intriguing building is the Lotus Mahal, or the Queen's quarters. The vaulted ceiling has a lotus carved in the center. A beautiful pool, lined with steps of smooth black slate, is believed to have been the bathtub for the Queen. The ruins are refined, but I keep getting the feeling of the desolation of today, rather than the luxury of yesterday. The treeless flat plains give one a sense of an empty, stark, dry reality. It's believed that the invaders took six months to completely sack, burn and destroy everything in the royal city and its satellites—right down to the last tree.

Entering the near-by town, I check out the museum, which houses some interesting sculpture and coins.

The guide informs me that inscriptions found at Hampi indicate that this area was settled in the first century. When I am ready to return to Hampi, I immediately spot a big sign, lettered in bright red, "BUS STAND." Seemed like good luck at the moment; however, it is not the bus stand. In spite of the fact that the sign is freshly painted, this is the "old" bus stand. The "new" bus stand is one-half kilometer north with no sign at all. A lot of people sitting on a crumbling wall marks the spot. However, I make a mental note of the "BUS STAND" sign, as the post office is there.

After the first week, I am compelled to search out every nook and cranny of all the temples. I feel so happy and free roaming around the countryside, exploring the ruins. The large number of small structures is unbelievable. There are even some miniature chapels here on the *ashram* hill. I wonder if they were used as family shines.

I find the finest carving is abundant in the largest temples. At the entrance of the Achutha temple, there is a wonderful life-sized carved relief of the Goddess Ganga. Determined to get a great photo, I calculated just the moment that the light would be perfect on it, but it clouds over just five minutes before I arrive. In another temple I find a robed friar in carved relief; a reminder that these temples were built in the 16th century, after the Portuguese arrived on the southwest coast in 1498.

One morning necessity impels me to go to nearby Hospet: I need a haircut and glue to fix the flapping sole of my sandal. En route, the bus is packed—as usual. However, a milkmaid with her full can of milk and a bag of one dozen eggs gets up and gives me her seat. I hesitate, but she absolutely insists. She will not sit back down. Buses are more expensive here and I wonder what profit she can make from her milk and eggs when she has to pay six rupees for her transportation round trip. So when I get off the bus, I hand her 3 *rupees,* which is the bus fare. I know she will not accept a handout, but I can at least pay her fare, since she had to stand. She refuses, but I explain, "for your ticket," knowing she will understand the word, "ticket." She smiles and takes the money with her palms placed together to thank me.

On a curbside, I find the local cobbler, who actually speaks English. He carefully uses a match stick to pick up a tiny dab of glue, smears it along the sole, then holds it tight for a couple of minutes. He then asks me for 10 rupees. "That's half the price of the sandals. I bet you do not get that from everyone else," I chide him.

"The glue is expensive," he counters in English.

Undaunted, I pick up the can and show him the 2 Rps. price printed on the label. I give him the 10 Rps. anyway. His life could not be easy.

However, I make up for the loss at my next stop, for I get a real bargain at the barber shop. Entering into the cool dark hut, I attempt to show the barber that I want my hair to be about three inches in length. He must have thought I meant cut off three inches. Anyway, I get a scalping—for only 7 Rps. *So this is a 25 cent haircut,* I tell myself as I take a long look in the wavy mirror. *At least, I will not need another haircut for a long time,* I observe.

When I return to the *ashram*, the Mataji is horrified when she sees my cropped hair. "No, no. We women must keep our hair long," she informs me.

I know the Indian women wear long hair, but I thought it was for beauty. Is she implying belief in the Biblical Samson phenomenon?

"Well, I have found with the heat and traveling, it is better for me to have short hair. However, not this short. Believe me, my ego is having a fit. I won't be able to look in the mirror for months," I explain to her through Jyothi's translations.

The next day I skip my nap and take off for the Vittala Temple, which lies farther than my usual route. I walk along the road, thinking that if I have enough time I will return on the longer route along the river. As I am meandering down the dirt road, watching for any new plant, bird or tree, two small boys

approach me on a little donkey cart. They get down and invite me to sit inside. Since I am quite content walking, I try to desist, but they will not take "*nahi*" [no] for an answer. In their eyes, they are only here to help the elderly lady. Wishing to please them, I board the small cart with my legs dangling off the back, and away we go. All goes well until we reach an extreme incline; I mean extreme. They both get off the cart, and I start to follow them.

"*Baito* [sit down]," one of the little fellows commands me in a sharp voice, as he whacks the seat with his tiny hand. I have my orders! He is so cute, I can hardly stifle my chuckle. I am to remain seated while they carefully inch the donkey forward until we are on level ground again, then away we go. Soon we reach a clearing with a small path to the right. They stop and indicate that this is the route to their home. I get off the cart and reach into my purse to give them a few *rupees*.

"*Nahi, nahi* [n0]," they protest as I try to hand them a couple of *rupee* notes.

"*Baksheesh*," I say with a smile, using a word every Indian understands.

"*Nahi, nahi*," they repeat with little shining faces of happiness as they run down the lane with the donkey and cart following.

I continue only a short distance to the courtyard of the Vittala Temple, definitely the crown jewe; of the Vijayanagara group, and the best preserved. Although hard granite does not lend itself to intricate carving, the art has reached its zenith here. The large columns of animals seem ready to pounce on the unbeliever and seen appropriate in the heavy stone. In other instances, the artists achieved more painstaking feats, such as the musical columns. Each large column is carved from a single stone into sixteen slender, round columns. When struck each column sounds a different tone. Another unusual feature is a chariot, again carved from granite, including the wheels, being pulled by elephants. There are several separate buildings, including a large hall for the temple dancers.

I return along the river where I find the "king's balance." Each year the *Brahmans* who took care of the temples were awarded the ruler's weight in gold and gems for their services. The river bank is solid granite, worn smooth by the river and weather. Ruins of many small temples dot the route. A small cave, decorated with the traditional red and white stripes used to mark a holy site (in the South) is said to be the spot that Sita dropped some jewelry when she was kidnapped by Ravana. Epic history has it that she dropped personal affects all along the way as she was carried across Bharata to Sri Lanka, so Rama would be able to follow her. From the cave, one can see some stone pilings in the river, the remnants of a bridge. Neither the British Raj nor the new *raj* has found it economical to rebuild a bridge here.

On my return, I take a shortcut at the back of the *ashram*. There I discover a tiny meadow protected by a semi-circle of trees. I pause to lie out on the tiny patch of grass. Tiny white butterflies, wings tipped with red, circle above. White star flowers hover in shadow of a huge boulder—too shy to reach the bright sun light. The pines whisper hello, as their long branches tremble in the breeze. Old friends nod and smile in this peaceful glen.

One day I head in the opposite direction and take a short cut over a hill and find a wonderful bathing tank with a tiny stone shrine in the middle. Already discovered by the weaver birds, they have decorated it with a dozen hanging nests. Since there are stone steps going down to the water, I sit to take in the incredible beauty, created by both human hands and nature. A sudden gust of wind catches and lifts a cloud of yellow butterflies. The lily pads raise off the water. A breeze blows away the past; a ray of sunlight creates the present. So who am I anyway?

Chapter Fifteen

An Ancient Kingdom

Across the river from Hampi is Anegundi, a small, old, traditional village with the ancestors of the *rajas* of Vijayanagara Empire still living in it. One has to cross the river by basket; yes, in a round, woven basket, so big that it holds four of us in addition to a large motorcycle. On the other shore, although there is a road, I reject it and head toward a small temple at the foot of some hillocks. From there I take a path that skirts the hills until I spot some remains of stone walls and fortifications. Beside a small temple I find a small pond filled with lovely miniature-flowered hyacinths, so thick the water is not visible. The flowers are so tiny that each stalk to holds a couple of dozen of the florets. I squat to admire the huge bouquet of purple-blue surrounded by deep green grass.

Then I wander on until I notice some dilapidated temple ruins hanging on a hillside beneath a gigantic granite boulder. Below them is a ridge that could possibly be a dam. Sure enough, as I cross over the ridge my eyes behold a large pond full of pink water lilies. It's not even 10 o'clock in the morning and I have seen bouquets of lilac water hyacinths and pink water lilies. Whatever the rest of the day brings, I can hardly complain.

Then I catch a whiff of a wonderful fragrance permeating the air. After investigating, I find its source: a scraggly shrub with tiny insignificant flowers. A couple of unusual blue-green birds catch my eye, but I do not get a good enough look to be able to find them in my bird book.
As I enter the village, I ask for the residence of Sri Ramadeva Raya. According to the directions, I only have to make a turn and follow a shady path. Sure enough, I find the right house, but he is not at home. An elderly gentleman informs me that he had just left five minutes before to inspect the fields. He will probably return in an hour or so.

When I return to the main road, I am approached by a woman with the look and dress of a gypsy. However, her clothes are very clean; the white skirt and drapes that form her blouse are sparkling white.

"I've been looking for you. They told me there was an English woman here, dressed in a white *sari*," she speaks with such profuse enthusiasm throwing her arms into the air that I taken aback.

By looking at her and her animated manner, I am not sure if "they" are spirits or humans.
However, Mira turns out to be a sensible, kind, and lovely person. She is from Belgium and has lived here for seven years. Actually, there are about ten Europeans staying here permanently, who make their living from selling *ganja*, marijuana, to the tourists who visit Hampi. She is curious why I am here, as "they" also told her I was asking for Ramadeva Raya.

On her advice, we have our cup of tea in the shack where they boil the water with a wood fire, instead of a kerosene burner—it tastes better. When we are settled, I explain that the gentleman in the book shop in Hampi Bazaar told me that meeting the local *raja* was a must, for he is quite interested in spiritual subjects. For this reason, I traveled over to Anegundi via a basket to take my chances on finding him at home. However, I missed him by five minutes, as he had gone out to inspect the fields—it is rice transplanting time. The 45 minute delay waiting for the basket boat had made the difference.

Then she tells me her story. When he had come here ten years ago to visit, she had taken up with a young *sadhu*, and ended up living with him. Although he enjoyed the feminine presence, he was a serious spiritual practitioner. Every day he repeated hundreds of *mantras* and performed certain rituals. Actually, she was a big help to him because he had more time for his religious duties since she took care of the cooking detail. They lived in one of the old temples that was in pretty good shape except it was

rather breezy in cool or rainy weather since it was open on three sides. Although her family could hardly comprehend her new lifestyle, they did keep in contact. So when her mother got a small inheritance, she shared it with her daughter.

Mira and the *sadhu* took the gift, a windfall when converted to rupees, and spent it to wall up the three open sides of the temple, ending up with a decent abode for themselves. However, just a year or so ago, the *sadhu* became gravely ill and died, leaving her alone. Since then she hooked up with a second *sadhu*. Again, he was not one willing to settle for *ganja* and sex, but had serious spiritual aspirations. He has a meditation hut in the Himalayas, but had come to this area for the winter. In the spring, she had gone there with him, but the torrential rains in the mountains were more than she could take. She stuck it out for two months, but had recently returned here to her old temple home.

After an hour passed, Mira walks to the *Raja's* home with me. The elderly gentleman is still on the porch. She knows him and introduces him as the *Raja's* father. However, he never held the title. His brother was the regent, but he had no sons. If the king has no sons, a nephew will inherit the title. This custom fits the joint family culture, in which cousins call themselves brothers and sisters. This practice was prevalent throughout India; however, it was a custom the British eliminated, so that they could take control of any throne without an heir.

When the *Raja* return, Mira takes off and his father retires to have his lunch alone. Ramadeva is a dignified, handsome man in his mid-forties. He tells me that he had intended to live the life of a *sannyasi*. In his place, his younger brother had taken on the responsibility of taking care of the family property and producing an heir. Unfortunately, the younger brother was killed in a motorcycle accident two years ago. At that time, the elder brother was suddenly propelled into taking over the duties of a householder, including overseeing the family properties. They must not be extensive because there is no sign of wealth in the home. To complete his responsibilities, he married and now has a one year old son.

He tells me that the older generations of the town look up to his family and come to him when they need some advice in their worldly affairs. Whereas, the younger generation is not particularly interested in the tradition of consulting the *rajas* of yore with their problems.
Since its lunch time, I excuse myself, but he insists that I stay to eat with him. We discuss various spiritual subjects; he is also a J. Krishnamurthi fan. He admits that he is definitely suffering from lack of mental stimulation here.

Then I ask him if there is any property for sale in this area. He assures me that some is available, but since it is so fertile, and it is being irrigated by public works, the price is going up. I can get decent land for $2,000 per acre. Of course, I have in mind only enough for a personal vegetable garden. I have visions of a small group of friends getting together to have a retreat place. I spot one fenced lot that is a tiny paradise complete with mature coconut palms and a pond with pink water lilies. Enchanted, I take a photo to send back to friends in New York City to try to entice them to a retirement in paradise.

A few days later, I decide to return to find the spot where Mira lives. I take a different route by crossing the river at the temple; only to find that my basket boat *karma* is getting worse. I walk through quite a few cultivated fields to reach the Sarovar Tank, the sister pond to the famous Sarovar Lake at Mt. Kailasa in the Himalayas. My white face attracts the eye of a local swami, who runs after me. Since he speaks English, he starts showing me around the ruins in that area. Down the road, we climb a hill to view a group of three very small temples. Amazing, one is a cave that is as cool as if it had been air-conditioned. He cannot explain the phenomenon, but there seems to be a large crack that the cool air is coming through. Anyone can move in and just live here, he tells me. There is even a door with bolts installed so one can lock up one section. During the tourist season, he actually rents it out to tourists at a daily rate. There is a catch: one has to carry water from the bottom of the hill, but it is not too far, he explains. A nice Indian *sadhu* had been living here, but a German girl arrived with lots of money. She taught him the fine arts of *ganja* smoking and sex, then they went tripping off to spend her father's money.

Everywhere you look the hills are filled with lush green meadows and valleys. I just love it; I am really thinking this is a place to consider to live. During our tour, the swami finds two tea stalls where we stop

for tea, made by kerosene flame, however. When we pass a vegetable stand, he suggests tells me if I will purchase vegetables, he will cook lunch for us. I am in a good mood from the lovely tour, so I agree. After purchasing a large bag of tomatoes and potatoes, he remembers that he needs some oil. I purchase the kilo size, plus a couple of other small items he needs.

An intelligent, interesting fellow with plenty of savvy, he had lived a householder's life as an engineer. Then when his children were married and settled, his wife went to live with one of them and he became a swami. While we sit and talk, he cooks a tomato rice dish, which is quite good. After we finish eating, although I volunteer, he insists on doing the dishes. When he goes out to bring in water from the well to clean the dishes, I place a 20 *rupees* note on the table. When he returns I tell him I have to go, but I left a small *dakshina*, donation, for him. He runs over to the table, and picks up the note.

"Is that all?" he exclaims.

"Yes, that is actually all I have left with me. I don't carry a lot of money around."

"Oh, well. I will go back to your quarters with you so you can get some more."

"That's not necessary. I really don't want to give any more."

"But when the foreigners come here, they give me such generous donations."

He pulls out his guest book and starts leafing through the pages to show me who has been here—mostly Europeans. They have signed his book and left their name and address. After each entry is a notation of the donation they gave, usually about 400 *rupees.*

"That's great that you get such generous donations. However, these people are only here for a short vacation. I have come for three years, so I am on a budget."

He does not get my point, or at least acts like he doesn't, for he continues washing the dishes hurriedly to go across the river with me. So I tell him in a firm tone that I am sure I have no extra money to give him because I will be at the Jain *ashram* for a month and want to give them a decent donation. Then I walk out in a hurry. Fortunately, he does not follow me.

My luck, the basket is on the other side, so I will have at least a 30 minute wait; this morning I waited over an hour for it. Resigned to my fate, I sit and watch the water flow. Where does the water come from? Where will it disappear to? Will the same drop of water ever pass this way again? The rushing water cuts deep into the red soil, leaving wide sandy banks. Butterflies gather on patches of cool, wet mud to pump themselves with moisture. I lie back and pretend that I can flutter across the river like a butterfly.

Then my basket boat *karma* really gets bad; words fail me in recounting the fiasco. The problem begins when, just as the basket arrives, it starts to sprinkle. The oarsman wants to wait, but I tell him, "Let's go, we can make it in ten minutes."

Obviously, we all know the rain pattern here; it's going to get worse. I was right, in ten minutes it starts pouring. The boat man makes a shelter for us by turning the basket over. So I am stuck under a basket for an hour with two men; one of whom punches me in the breast with his elbow; that is, until I show him my fist. And that was not the worse part.

When the rain slacks off and we make it to the other shore, the hill that we have to climb has become a slippery, slimy mudpie. My sandals were not made for this particular challenge. Seeing the two men doing okay with their bare feet, I take my sandals off, but I still slip and slide. Finally, I am at the mid-way point, with no hope of ever reaching the top. Just at the moment, I am ready to slide back down the hill to wade along the shore to see if I can find a better spot, the boatman takes pity on me. He somehow grabs my hand and helps me out of the slough of despond. I stop at the first public water faucet, take off my sari and wash the caked mud off it and my body. Dressed in a full-length petticoat and blouse, I can

hardly be guilty of public exposure, and I cannot get any wetter.

I somehow manage to rewrap my *sari* and drag myself over to my usual stall for a cup of hot tea. As I am sitting there sipping the hot, sweet liquid and breathing deeply, my attention is diverted by a commotion across the street. The monkeys are on a rampage. At least a dozen of the largest males are lined up across a roof, teeth barred, making a terrible racket. The females are jumping back and forth from tree to roof. Finally, I see the problem. A couple of teenagers are trying to trap a baby monkey. Actually, they have it trapped on a screened verandah and are now trying to get a rope on around its neck.

Somehow I pick up my soggy bag of bones and wind my way back to the *ashram*. When I approach the ladies' hostel, I am surprised to witness the same scenario. Prakash and the cook have trapped a baby monkey in the kitchen—and already have a rope around its neck. Over a dozen large males and countless females are on the high wall opposite the kitchen, complaining at the top of their lungs--monkey screeching is loud. Prakash tells me that they want it for a pet and asks me what I think. I advise him to let it go because it is actually a juvenile, so big that I doubt it will ever accept any training. After some ten minutes, the noise stops, so I guess he released it. *God, what a strange day*.

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Chapter Sixteen

Material for a New Mindset

My month is almost up, so I am eager to get out of here before my unclean time cycles around. It has been a good month in many ways—a real leisurely time. I have meditated every morning and evening, no levitations, but I have had some peaceful moments on my little pad. Daily I have explored the wonderful temples and countryside. In spite of the inconveniences, I have felt content most of the time.

Oh dear, Jyothi just told me that *Guru Poornima,* a special day to honor the *gurus*, is coming up and that Mataji wants me to stay. The truth is she ordered that I have to stay for the up-coming celebration. Jyothi has already queried me about my age. Since I am 50, she naturally assumes that I am not fertile, as Indian women have a tendency to start and complete their menstrual cycles at a younger age than European women. She even said when she found out my age, “Oh, then you don’t have to worry about secluding yourself for a week from Mataji, like the rest of us.”

This was not the only clue I had indicating the severity of the rule. One evening in *satsang*, Mataji was virtually yelling at Prakash; she went on and on. . . and on. I was thinking it was quite unusual for a such a saint to be so disturbed. *He must have stolen something,* I conjecture. Later when I am able to inquire from Jyothi what the ruckus was about, I find out that Prakash “allowed” a young lady to enter the temple during her menses.

“You mean it is Prakash’s responsibility to question all young women who enter the temple. Aside from the fact that he is often away running errands for the *ashram*, a young Indian man, especially a bachelor, can hardly be expected to do such ‘dirty work.’”

Jyothi, my ally and informant, just stares at me with a “how should I know?” look, and sensibly defers making any comment. Jyothi is crippled from a car accident in Bombay when she was sixteen. She is a beautiful woman of about forty with lovely salt and pepper hair down to her waist. Due to her handicap, she was never able to marry. This discrimination against women and men who are not able to bear children is prevalent in all castes and creeds. I recall a gentleman who once described his daughter’s marriage arrangements to me. He told me of his anxiety because the prospective groom had been in a car accident, but seemed to have recovered completely. Nevertheless, he assumed his parental duty and requested a private conference with the young man to ask him if the accident had affected his virility. “I didn’t like doing it, but I had to,” he had confided.

I am surprised to find out that Jyothi may have been here when I visited in 1979. When I question her about the three nuns whom I had met who were starting out on a pilgrimage across south India, I find out that she was traveling with three nuns at that time, as their assistant. She always went ahead of them to make arrangements for their meals and lodging because they could only eat food from kitchens in Jain homes. Whenever possible, they slept in *chaudris,* pilgrimage shelters, of Jain temples.

In spite of my misgivings about my approaching physical malady, I feel obligated to stay and make the best of things. It would simply be too rude to walk out the day before *Guru Poornima;* the day that honors Mataji. And I would have missed quite a celebration.

I did it again! If I had left when I planned, I would have gone through the whole month without a major *faux pax*. Since everyone is getting ready for *Guru Poornima,* I had moments of feeling useless. However, I found out why it’s better that I just remain useless. One evening at our evening satsang with Mataji, Jyothi is preparing the cotton wicks for the extra butter lamps necessary for the ceremony. When I volunteer to help, she shows me how to take a little puff of cotton and twirl the top of it to make a little

wick. I pull off a little puff, but the little wick just will not form for me; the cotton seems to stiff. So I just automatically spit on my fingers, as if I were threading a needle, and give the cotton a successful twirl.

"No," Mataji's voice stops me short.

It's funny. Without a word said, I know exactly what I did wrong. You do not spit on items intended for worship. Sure makes sense to me. Truth is I had already learned this lesson. Once when I was in the Himalayas, the *ashram* manager there arranged a ritual in commemoration of Krishna's birthday. We were all to offer a flower, so I was handed the loveliest rose to give Krishna. Immediately, earthy me, I put it straight to my nose to inhale its heady fragrance. Fortunately, a friend saw me and chuckled, then motioned me aside. She explained my mistake and gave me another flower. You cannot offer anything to the Lord that has had its fragrance sniffed out of it by a human nose—a heathen one at that. So I should have remembered that lesson.

People begin arriving from all over India, particularly Bombay and Madras. All the empty buildings and cottages fill to capacity. As it turns out, devotees who only come here once or twice a year have built these quarters. Most of them hope to retire here someday. Since they are from the city, they speak perfect English, so I am able to communicate easily. One friendly lady from Bombay asks me how long I plan to stay. I tell her I will be leaving right after the ceremonies.

"Oh, you should stay here longer while you have free time. It is such a wonderful opportunity."

"But it is difficult staying here. It is just so noisy since the ladies' hostel is by the kitchen, plus pilgrims are constantly coming and going."

"You should ask Mataji to give you separate quarters."

"How could I ask for special treatment, when Lakshmi and Jyothi who are older women and have served Mataji for so long have to stay in these quarters?"

She sort of smiles, purses her lips, and looks down without making any comment.

Mataji lights up with all the devotees surrounding her. During the evening ceremony and bell-ringing in the meditation cave, she becomes playful and starts trying to push people over. When she approaches me to break the boredom, I do the same thing to her, lightly, as she passes by. I figure someone else may as well have some fun too. At first, she is quite startled, then she realizes that I am only playing too. So we have a hip-pushing contest, but I let her win.

The following day is *poornima*, full moon, bearing several surprises even for the cynic. To get into the spirit of things, I even go the temple and withstand the terrible banging of the big bell. First thing after breakfast, there is to be a big ritual. Mataji is present, seated at the end of the altar table. I am right in the big middle of the crowd, eagerly awaiting to see what she will do because I have been told to expect a surprise.

All of a sudden, one gentleman gets up and starts saying something in Gujurati. After he speaks for a few minutes, someone else speaks up with some comments, then another. I keep waiting for the ritual to begin, but the talking among themselves continues. Finally, I squeeze to the door to step outside for some fresh air. After ten minutes, a gentleman comes out and I inquire when the ritual will start.

"But it has been going on for almost an hour," he replies in perfect English.

"But I was present up until ten minutes ago, and there was no ritual."

"Oh, yes. It is actually an auction."

"You know that is what it sounded like to me, but I thought it was the projection of my western mind. Now, could you kindly explain to me how an auction is a ritual."

“We support various charities, so we bid to give donations to the charities.”

“I see...”

“Yes, the highest bidder gets the *punya* [merit].”

Before I can question him further, although I have no idea what I will ask, he begins to question me about my stay here. As it turns out, his daughter is a regular resident here. She has gone to her family home in Rajasthan for a couple of months for a period of intensive meditation and fasting. I express my disappointment at not getting to meet such a sincere seeker. I do wish she would have been here, so I would have had a companion for meditation each morning. I can easily understand why she went home for serious meditation—she did not like those banging doors either.

By that time, everyone is filing out to have tea. Afterwards, Mataji will conduct her part of the ceremony. So fifteen minutes later, we all pack back into the cave room. Everyone starts singing *bhajans*, while Mataji drifts away into a light trance. All eyes are on her as she begins to lightly rub her heart area. Within a few minutes, a bright yellow-orange powder starts to emerge, then accumulate. She has arranged her *sari phalu* [the end that falls over the shoulder], so that the powder falls into it.

This miracle of producing powder out of thin air is rare, but not unheard of. The powder, or sometimes ash, is supposed to have a special healing quality. Of course, I question, would anything produced out of thin air necessarily be magical? Although many believe that the ancient yogis could do such things, they doubt anyone has such powers today. In some cases, there is evidence that it is a trick. I did have a first-hand report from a gentleman who traveled with a swami from Mysore who produces ash. The gentleman did find a large stash of ash in the *swami's* suitcase. The *swami* caught him, accused him of rummaging through his suitcase, and was furious. The gentleman contends he only intended to help the *swami* pack as he was running late for an international flight. Anyway, after that incident, they parted company.

However, everyone here is sure that this powder is special. From my front row seat, I can see no evidence that there is any deception. Mataji has no sleeves to hide it and the powder is bright orange, so I would be difficult to conceal without staining something. We all line up for Mataji to rub some on our foreheads. Afterwards, we troop off for lunch. No rice and dal for lunch today-we are served an array of delicious dishes, including a couple of desserts. A special cook is here to prepare the feasts for the two day celebration.

“Come, quickly. Mataji is calling you,” Jyothi is signaling me. I follow her back to the cave to find everyone gathered around the little antique Chandra Prabhu idol.

“Look at the milk coming out of it,” they push me up front and center. Sure enough there is a milky substance coming out of both eyes, and also seeping from the heart area. I can plainly see the liquid oozing out of the stone creating a regular drip running down its body. I am sure it would be impossible for this to be set-up because there is now at least a cup of milk accumulated in a stainless steel tray at the feet. Admittedly, the idol is washed daily with milk and other liquids, but they roll off the marble. If anything remained, it would surely evaporate in this hot, dry climate. Anyway, this type of stone could not absorb so much liquid. I have to admit that I am witnessing an extra-ordinary event.

They say this phenomenon occurs regularly on special Jain holidays. I happily accept my ration of the ambrosia, sipping it with a mixture of sanctity and merriment. My mouth may be silent, but my mind is running: *If the ambrosia is so wonderful, what has it done for the people here who have been sipping it for years? Jyothi and another resident remain physically handicapped; Lakshmi is angry; Prakash is frustrated.*

As it turns out Mataji has a teenage daughter, who also comes for a few days. I am surprised to learn that she was actually raised by my roommate, Lakshmi. Mataji was married and leading a happy householder's life when her husband suddenly died. Since she is the emotional type, to drown her

sorrow, she began coming to this *ashram* to her *Guru*, who lived in a cave—no buildings at that time. She soon decided to leave the world and live in the *ashram*, leaving her daughter to be raised by Lakshmi's family, who were also devotees of this Jain holy man.

Several young girls, about 12 years of age, are also here for the celebration. They want me to accompany them to the local Hindu temple, which they like to visit, even though they are Jains. As we enter the gates of the Virupaksha temple, we see a sign in English: "Please keep off the plantains from the sight of the monkeys." Translated, it means: the monkeys will grab any banana they see. Once at the *ashram* I witnessed them grabbing one from crippled Jyothi. Although this temple does not have as many wonderful sculptures as the later temples in the area, this one is a huge maze. Somewhere in a back corner, the girls show me the spot where you look through a crack between the granite stone to see the temple *gopura*, tower, upside down. They tell me that this temple is pictured in their physics' book because of this unusual phenomenon.

With great enthusiasm, they also relate to me a story they read in their elementary school reader, approximately sixth grade. Once upon a time, there was a woodcutter who lived in India. Every day he went to the forest to cut enough wood to last a day for himself and his neighbors. After he had worked for an hour or so, he relaxed under a sprawling tree until the heat of the day had passed. Then he loaded up his donkey and headed home for a leisurely evening talking and playing board games with his fellow villagers.

One fine day, a couple of American entrepreneurs approached him. "Look, this is a huge forest here, worth lots of money. All we have to do is cut all the trees, then we can use the lumber to build a big sub-division. Why, you will be rich. Then you will be able relax and enjoy life."

"But that's exactly what I'm doing now," replied the woodcutter.

The next morning I pack my bag and am ready to leave on the early bus. I bid good-by to dear Jyothi, whom I will surely miss.

"Please come back and stay with us again. We can arrange for you to live here," she entreats me.

"Jyothi, you know I have had a good stay here in many aspects. I really value your friendship. You have been so kind and helpful. You know, I really don't think I will return to a place where the dogs sleep in a bed, while the people sleep on a hard granite floor, the monkeys eat the only fruit, and the dogs drink all the milk. I can't explain it, but it's just too wacky. I still have to have some rhyme and reason in my physical reality. I'm not a saint like you."

She blushes, then laughs. With a smile, she hobbles out to the gate with me, insisting on carrying my bag of books, purchased from the local book vendor. Then I take my last hike down the dirt road to the bus stop.

As I am walking down the road, I ruminate over the past month. I have said that one reason for my travels in India is the experiencing of a different conditioning, to attempt to look at the world through a different mindset. I am certainly getting material to challenge that task. Mostly, I am amazed that this place was so different from what I thought it would be from my previous visit. The only activity here that could be considered spiritual was the singing of *bhajans*, which falls under the category of devotion, whereas I am more interested in the path of knowledge. I had reason to believe there would be some type of study, for the three nuns I had met before were quite scholarly, as well as sincere seekers.

Although the life here may not have suited me, it is perfect for others: Jyothi is totally happy here. And she does have options; her family is quite wealthy. Watching Jyothi's kindness and devotion to Mataji, as well as to me, was surely a gift I received during this month. Under all the physical difficulties she had to deal with, I never heard one complaint or saw even the hint of a frown. Maybe she truly is the saint in this place.

Chapter Seventeen

The Peaceable Kingdom

Back in Bangalore, while I am re-evaluating what I want from my trip here, Hari hands me a booklet by a Swami Nirmalananda. He is a sage who lives in a sylvan setting in B. R. Hills. Located in Karnataka in the northern Nilgiris at the end of a road from Mysore, Biligiri Ranga remains a primeval forest. Actually, as the crow flies, it's not that far from where I was in Kottagiri. Although Hari had not met the Swami, he told me that the local newspaper had run a series by Swami Nirmalananda, and that he appeared to have been influenced by J. Krishnamurthi. Somewhat intrigued at the possibility of living in a forest setting with a scholarly swami, I immediately sent a letter off to B.R. Hills.

Dear Swami Nirmalananda,

I have been a student of Vedanta—major influences are Swami Chinmayananda and J. Krishnamurthi—for 15 years. I have an understanding of the concepts, but frankly I have had difficulty applying them in the "real" (unreal) world. Therefore, I have come to India for a period of *sadhana*. First, I am looking for a peaceful setting for meditation, and, secondly, *satsang* with a genuine teacher. A friend mentioned your *ashram* as a good possibility and gave me your little booklet, "

To Live to Benefit Mankind," which I find aligns with my point of view about doing some service. However, I still have my own mental house-cleaning to accomplish, although I have been working at it for years now.

I have just returned to Bangalore from a month's stay in Hampi. I am assisting with the editing of a spiritual magazine, so I will have to be here in Bangalore for the next ten days. I am hoping that then it will be possible to come visit your *ashram*, if you are in station, and have a simple accommodation for sleeping and food. Of course, I will be able to pay a reasonable donation for such. I would like to stay for at least one month because I think it takes several weeks for one to assess the Guru and for the teacher to assess the student. I am 50 years old, and don't have time, energy or inclination to waste your time or mine.

Sincerely, Nancy

I receive a reply, almost by return mail. With anticipation, I open the envelope and am elated that the Swami assures me: Yes, I will be welcome. Further, he mentions that the accommodation will be sparse, but adequate.

Two weeks later, right at dusk, the bus makes an "unscheduled" stop to let me off right at the dirt road that leads to Vishwa Shanti Niketan, the *ashram* of Swami Nirmalananda. By the time I trek one-quarter of a mile, lugging my suitcase, heavy with books, I am wondering if I will be able to look and play the part of a guest.

For I am truly exhausted. The 7:00 a.m. bus would have taken five hours, but it was "under repair." It was not until 8:30 a.m., after I had been told at least a dozen times, "It's coming now," that they decided to cancel it. That meant I could take the 9:15 a.m. bus—a seven hour trip, as it follows a more circuitous route—or I would have to wait for the 1:30 p.m. bus to get the five-hour direct route. Considering the

long delay I had already endured—the clock had flashed 6:05 a.m. as I entered the station—I opted to take the longer "scenic" route.

However, I discovered Karnataka is not all that scenic. Its beauty is tucked away in hidden valleys, but overland on this journey, and on the one to Hampi, I found the landscape is mainly dry desert, dotted with only a few scrub bushes. By the time we reached the scenery of the foothills, I was barely hanging together. The monsoon is sparse this year, so it was an extremely hot journey.

We took a 45-minute lunch break, which meant that we would arrive at 5:15 p.m., not at 4:30 p.m., as indicated on the computer at the ticket counter. But I could not complain, I needed a break. I only allowed myself a cup of hot tea and a couple of small bananas as my stomach was beginning to feel strange. The bus station and town—I know not its name—were too dreadful to remember, so I will spare you the details. Suffice to say that the out-door toilets sat quietly awaiting a cleaning by the monsoon rains. I suppose that's why the latrine shed did not have a roof.

As soon as we reached the hills, I got some relief as the temperature dropped considerably. Suddenly there was no sign of human life for miles. We must have passed through an animal sanctuary as I spotted several elephants near the road. The man across from me spotted a couple of beautiful deer, sambuars. The driver slowed almost to a stop, so we could all get a good look. Later we went through a small clearing with a couple of buildings where I spotted two juvenile elephants tied along side the road. I got a good look at them because the moment we passed I had my head out the window barfing up the recently ingested tea and bananas. Under these circumstances, I cannot say I fully appreciated them, so I made a mental note to return. The winding mountainous road really was getting to me. I got out my homeopathic remedy pouch and took a dose of my trusty Nux Vomica (motion sickness remedy) and settled back for a relatively relaxed last hour of twisting, uphill roads with my stomach dancing in sync with the bumping, jumping bus.

As I enter a gate and follow the walkway to the *swami's* stone cottage, it is so dark that I can hardly make out the surroundings. However, I am quite encouraged by the sound of falling water in the background. From the wide porch, a skinny, clean-shaven *swami* greets me and motions for me to come inside.

He is all smiles, giggles and cackling laughter, interspersed with oohs, aahs, and haas. Only when he picks up a clip-board and starts to write, do I realize he has not uttered a single word during the two minutes of his greeting. I did not know that he practiced *mauna,* silence; evidently Hari did not know either because he had not mentioned it.

"There was no 7:00 a.m. bus today," I explain my late arrival.

"Aah," the Swami affirms, as if he already knew.

Before I know it I am seated in front of the Swami, who scribbles on his pad, "Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please, that would be great."

"Milk or sugar?" he writes.

"Just a little sugar. I think black tea may help settle my stomach."

Seated on a plain straw mat, I sip the hot, sweet tea. But the truth is, I still feel like a lump of left-over oatmeal. Then the Swami suggests I take a bath. When I happily agree, he directs me to the bath house. Actually, after traveling, an Indian woman would not even have had a cup of tea before bathing. When I enter the adobe hut that serves as a bath house, a large bucket of steaming water is sitting there waiting for me. Hot water. . . there is hot water here! I have not had a hot bath since I've been in India. And the bathroom is warm and cozy! Then I spot the stove, modeled of adobe, with a few embers still glowing in it.

However, I find that the water is so hot I don't think I can bear it. When I look around, I can find no

faucet for cold water to cool it down. Naturally, I am already undressed when I discover the water is too hot, so I decide to grin and bear it. Surely, my tired muscles will appreciate the heat. And do they ever. The hot water trickling over my tired, cold body is like a miraculous salve. My body consciously inhales the vitality from each mugful as my pores suck in the warmth of the hot liquid. *So this is what bathing is about*, I think.

I do feel slightly better; at least I can now pretend to look alive if I make a conscious effort. Returning to my straw mat, I watch the Swami darting around, dealing with the making of fresh bread and other details with a servant, the same one who prepared the water for my bath. The Swami wears a faded orange robe over his thin, taunt body, which appears to be quite spry. Only the short gray stubble covering his head indicates his 62 years. There are two approved hair-styles for swamis: shaved head or never cut.

At last he sits down on his tiger-skin pallet and poises himself for conversation. First, I ask him about his practice of *mauna*.

“By speaking too much and indulging in unnecessary talk, we only create an atmosphere of noisy insanity,” he writes on his pad.

“Yes, I do realize that *mauna* is a good discipline. It keeps us from getting carried away with so many issues, most of which do not matter anyway. . . and in any case, we often cannot do anything about.”

“Aah,” he nods in agreement. “Silence is the Temple of Truth.”

Then the Swami suggests some *yoga* exercises, “since you are tired after the long, tedious bus journey.”

“But I think I am so tired that I don’t feel like I can even move.”

“Oh, yes. You’ll feel much better afterward. Then you will sleep well,” he assures me.

I am not convinced, but am willing to give it a try. The Swami and I chant “Om” three times, then do a series of simple exercises that move and stretch, but do not contort, every single limb and muscle, including the eyes. Having survived that ordeal, I now get dinner. I am not sure about eating either, but I simply do not have the energy to object to food offered by an Indian. They somehow imbue food with such sacramental qualities that it is the greatest insult to fail to offer food to a guest; topped in gravity only by the guest’s refusal to eat the offered food. He serves me some homemade whole-wheat bread with jam. As I watch him, each act seems to be carefully calculated and precisely executed—exactly one tablespoon of jam per slice of bread.

It’s only 8:00 p.m. when he asks the servant to show me to the guest cottage. I am so relieved to be able to go to bed early, but it turns out this is the Swami’s usual hour of retirement. Daily he awakens around 2:00 a.m. because he thinks this quiet and peaceful time is best for meditation.
The short bio of the Swami in the brochure he had sent me spoke of his austere life-style and specifically stated that he took no tea, coffee, chili pickles or dairy products. *Bhogi* (materialist) that I continue to be, I brought a big supply of tea bags with me, along with my electric coil. So when the Swami offered me tea this evening, I was surprised.

Even more so, when the next morning, the Swami arrives at my door at 6:00 a.m. with a cup of steaming tea. He makes me taste it to make sure it is okay. It is fine, except the Indians boil tea, so it is a bit too strong. Not that I complain; how often does someone serve me tea first thing in the morning? I find a bush with some small *nimbus* (limes) that I use to dilute and lighten the dark color. With the tea, the Swami also hands me a note telling me to be at his *kutia,* hut, at 8:00 a.m. for *yoga* exercises.

While we workout, I look through the open door and see speckled doves feasting on the grain that is put out each day for them. Eventually, I will be delegated the honor of putting out the bird seed. The feeding area is surrounded by various varieties of orange trees, with a lots of taller, native trees in the background. This is truly the forest primeval. Dare I hope that I have found the idyllic spot I have been

searching for—a natural forest and a *swami* who understands English.

After breakfast, the Swami tells me that I am free to do as I please until lunch. Immediately I streak out for a walk behind the *ashram* where I thought I heard a waterfall last night. I was mistaken; the sound I heard is caused by a curious phenomenon. As I exit through the gate at the back of the grounds, I am on a mammoth granite ridge that extends as far as I can see in both directions. From this spot, one can see back to the Karnataka plains; on a clear day, one can probably see Mysore, the nearest city. However, one would not be able to enjoy the vista long because the wind is constantly whipping along here. Strangely, it's not blowing at the *ashram* only 50 feet down the hill; we only get the noise that sounds like a rushing waterfall at night.

At his usual 11:00 a.m. lunch time, I am back on my straw mat as the Swami serves my plate with plain, boiled vegetables and rice.

"I'm not used to being served by a Swami," I comment with a smile.

"We consider you our child, so we treat you as your own mother would," he stops serving to write on his pad. (I'm sure he means Indian mothers, but it seems irrelevant to enlighten him on the subject of Western mothers.)

Since I have been in Pondicherry, he asks about Aurobindo, particularly if he is known in America. I tell him I had never heard of Aurobindo when I was in U.S. Then I add, "I loved the *ashram* area though. Certainly, I admire The Mother and Aurobindo; he had such an incredible intellect. However, the phenomenon that surrounds them continues to remain a mystery to me. How can people idealize dead persons who taught immortality? You know I like to think feel that we have to keep our logic in tact, even in our spiritual quest."

He takes his clip board and taps me on the head. With a smile, he utters his affirmative, "Aah."

"Yet," I continue, "even insensitive me feels a wonderful, peaceful silence around that *ashram*. It is something extra-ordinary."

In the mornings, I am up before dawn, for I do not want to miss anything. I set up a little station on the corner of the veranda: a meditation cushion, bird book, notebook for inspirations and insights, and a book by J. Krishnamurthi in case I start feeling dull. As I watch a few minutes before sunrise, the sky begins to turn gray on the mountain crest. The bulbuls announce this first sign of light with their melodious songs. Soon I hear a dozen birds chirping from different directions.

From on my cushion, the nice symphony vibrates my heart and puts a smile on my face. Fifteen minutes later the small yellow-breasted wrens contribute their rapid cheep, cheep, cheep. A shrill call of a large bird, probably a koel, resounds through the forest. The swishing of the trees swaying in the wind on the ridge adds a soothing background beat. The occasional darting of a bulbul to catch an unsuspecting bug is the only movement I note. I breathe in the peace of this luminous perfect now.

At times my eyes close in meditation; at others, they are open to encompass nature's drama. Thirty minutes pass before it's light enough for the speckled doves to awaken and add their cooing. Soon they are fluttering about, moving from the high branches where they roosted for the night to the branches of the smaller citrus trees. They seem to be cautiously checking out their feeding ground. The slightest noise or movement on the walk sends them in a cloud back to the higher branches. A small striped squirrel scampers up to breakfast on the grain. A pair of pied wagtails land under the bench along the pathway, but prefer to remain silent. Four crows fly by, assuring that their presence be noted with their loud cawing.

By seven, the cooing of some thirty doves drowns out any other sounds. Their chorus soon fades away as they occupy themselves with eating *ragi*, a native grain. English speakers call the round, ash-gray colored grain, which turns dark brown when cooked, millet. *Ragi* constitutes the major diet of the tribals

throughout this region. Singing a melody taught them by their grandmothers, the women grind it into flour, mix it with water, boil it, then form it into large balls that are eaten with a chutney, if available.

Iam content to spend the whole day outside, sitting on the veranda for an hour, then walking around the vicinity until *yoga* at 8:00 a.m. After *yoga*, breakfast and a bath, I return to the veranda to read and take notes, for I am thinking about a possible writing project. In the afternoon while the Swami is napping, I leave the *ashram* and head down the road. Just like in Hampi, I am impelled to be up and exploring, and I am not disappointed. The village is spread out over several miles with small pockets of habitations here and there, so there is a lot to explore. Ten foot lantana bushes decorate the roadside with their bright orange and pink flowers. However, they are not intended for show; their thorns and thick growth form an impenetrable barrier to protect the homes from wandering wild beasts.

But the best part is off the beaten track. By the third day, I have scoped out the surrounding territory and am ready to take a trek into the forest. As soon as the Swami has closed his door for his nap, I head out back. I walk along the ridge, then catch a trail going down into the forest.
The shade is so dense that I find only a few plants and flowers growing on the ground. Most of the trees are broad-leaved evergreens or varieties of bamboo. Soon I spot a couple of orchid plants in the trees—too high for me to see very well. Then suddenly I see them hanging in every tree. However, I am disappointed that none of them appear to be in bloom.

At one point, as I am going along a path, I see the tail-end of an animal—who saw me first. So I am only able to observe its rump; reddish fur on its body with a slim black tail like a cat. Further, down the trail I surprise some of the local tribals, about eight men and women, carrying large logs of wood. Needless to say, they are quite started to see a white face in the jungle, but smile and reciprocate my greeting of "*namaste*."

The next morning, the Swami tells me I should not be going so deep into the jungle. *Well, news certainly travels fast here,* I take mental note. I do not bother to ask him how he knew my whereabouts.

"I do not feel there is any danger. I didn't see any ferocious animals. Only one small fellow that ran before I even could get a good look at it." I describe what I had seen, but he cannot identify it; neither can anyone whom I later ask.

"We never go into the jungle. There are bears that can crush you to death. They come here on the *ashram* grounds to eat the fruit off the tree behind your cottage."

"I haven't seen any."

"It has already finished fruiting this year. Remember you are my guest. I can't be responsible for you if you go into the jungle."

"So the guru who teaches Vedanta, which clearly states 'I am not the body,' is concerned for my physical body?"

He laughs and lets the subject drop.

So I am totally free from noon until 7:00 p.m. when we again go through the *yoga* routine. I am so grateful that I have so much quiet time to myself. . . and it is quiet here. One evening as we eat our daily bread and jam, the Swami asks, "Are you lonely?"

"No, I am fine. With my walks, books and meditation, I feel totally content."

He notes on his pad, "Now because of this asthma which I have had for several years, I have asked Swami Brahmadev to stay here. But for years people asked me: 'Aren't you lonely here?' I used to point to The Above. So how could I be alone?

"There is real joy in abiding in the Self. But as I have to deal with all and sundry for anything and

everything, I don't get enough time for a quiet atmosphere; in spite of our *ashram* being in such a quiet and peaceful spot, much better than other *ashrams*."

"I can affirm that it is much quieter."

Every morning I meditate alone on my cushion on the veranda. In the evenings, we meditate together for about 20 minutes after *yoga*. He makes helpful suggestions for my meditation practice. He stresses keeping the mental gaze at the heart center rather than on the breath or at the forehead.

He writes, "When the mind is focused on the heart, then we are in the thought-free state. When any thought arises, one must sacrifice this manifestation of the masculine intellect to the feminine heart. When the feminine heart and the masculine mind are united, there is bliss."

"So is this what you mean when you write 'fuel the fire and fan the flame'?"

"Aaah," he grins as he taps me on the head with his clipboard.

"What exactly do you mean by 'heart'?" I ask him.

"True love, feelings and compassion for all beings. The thing is to have a translucent mind and an attitude of love and compassion for all."

"So it is a state of being?"

"Yes. Remember, Nancy, we do not create peace. Peace comes uninvited to a quiet, tranquil mind. Even the Christian fathers of the desert tradition said: 'If you are without thoughts, you are without sin.'"

In spite of Swami's apprehensions about my treks through the jungle, I continue to take off immediately when he closes the door for his nap. With my one-hour morning walk before *yoga*, and the three hours in the afternoon, before a week is up, there is not a road or path in the extensive village complex that I have not investigated. I just love the jungle and have discovered a huge boulder that I can climb upon to sit and read without danger of some animal sneaking up behind me. As I turn around to leave, I come face to face with a tree branch that supports a row of big orchid plants lined up its entire length. I am sure it is a type of dendrobium orchid, but I have not seen it anywhere else. Unfortunately, it is not the season to see them in bloom. I will have to return in the winter to see that beautiful sight, for thick stalks from last years' blossoms are dangling from both sides of the limb.

Every afternoon I am wandering around exploring trails, made by animals. Then I land on my big boulder for an hour or so. From this perch, one day I encounter the most beautiful parrots with a purple splotch on their heads. I cannot even find them in my bird book. As I quietly watch, I realize most of them are hopping through the branches of a certain type of tree. They remind me in size and spread of a redbud tree, but the flowers are orange clusters of sweetpea flowers, which must give some nectar to the parrots.

Although I love my treks through the forest, I also enjoy my time spent with the Swami. In addition to our informative conversations on spiritual subjects; we have our love of nature in common. After dinner one evening he hands me a paper on which he has written a tribute to his dear pet, Bambi. The baby deer had been brought to him to nurse, for no one knew what happened to its mother. The Swami had kept it by his side, feeding it from a plastic bottle. Even now, he displays great joy when he speaks of Bambi; he must have been a very good caregiver. Bambi grew up and, although not restrained, she chose to remain in the protected confines of the *ashram*. However, one day tragedy struck; Bambi was killed in an accident.

"By a car?" I question.

"Aah." He grabs his pad. "She was too trusting; she did not know to fear cars since so few come this way."

The Swami is now involved in a project to install a commemorative statue of Bambi in the garden beside his cottage. An artist in Bangalore is making the sculpture. Another artist came to the *ashram* to do a clay sculpture of the Swami. The bust will be cast in bronze and put along side Bambi's statue.

As the Swami requested, I read over the inscription that is to be chiseled in the stone at the base of Bambi's statue. I make one small suggestion, but the Swami decides he likes it better the way it is, so it is ready to be submitted to the stone engraver. Quite satisfied, afterwards, he is sitting and humming. He has a habit of humming no matter what task he is doing. "There should be this type of nursing a melody in you all the time," he notes.

One evening the Swami is making preparations to light the oil lamp. Just as I am thinking, *after he is accustomed to my presence, perhaps he will allow me to light the lamp*, he motions me over and hands me the matches. When I spent time in Kerala, I always appreciated this simple daily ritual. I carefully adjust the little cotton wicks, so they will not go out or burn the peanut oil too fast. As dusk descends on the mountain top, I ignite the first light of the night. My life has always been without ritual or ceremony. I begin to cherish this one quiet moment of conscious action each evening.

Chapter Eighteen

Clouds over Paradise

This morning brought more fog, rain, wind. I do not think it is foggier, rainier, windier than the previous four mornings, but the accumulation is beginning to take its toll on my psyche. I am not the only one complaining. The cabbage roses along the sidewalk are not able to open their bright pink faces because their petals are rotting. The electric power, usually off from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. for conservation, has been off for the past 24 hours, which has certainly has contributed to the dismal atmosphere. There is not even enough light in my room to read; that is, unless I open a shutter to let in the wind and fog.

One afternoon a charming woman, about forty years of age, shows up at my door. She had just returned from a visit to her family home in Bangalore where she happened to see Swami Brahmadev. He told her that there was an American lady at the *ashram* and that she should go and meet me. Nagamani lives just down the road and oversees a house and property here in B.R. Hills owned by her family. Since it is the rainy season, they are in the process of planting coffee on what they hope will be an income-producing plantation. After we share a few mundane details of our lives, she gets up to go. I suggest that if she stays another thirty minutes the Swami will be up from his nap, so she can see him.

“Oh, no, I don’t want to see him; that’s why I came by when I knew he was asleep. He got so angry with me the last time I was here because I forgot to bring him a telephone book from Bangalore.”

“That’s strange. There’s no telephone here.”

“No, no. He wanted it so he could get the addresses of all the wealthy businessmen in Bangalore. He wants to mail them requests for donations for one of his projects.”

“Do you suppose it is for that bust of himself? Once he told me the artist was donating it, but another time, he contradicted himself. I suppose there will be the expense of casting it.”

“I don’t know. He’s always cooking up some project that he needs money for. When he completed that Ganesha temple, we thought he would leave us alone about donations for a while. Then it was the Bambi statue; then his own memorial bust. Actually, he already collected for both of them some time back.”

My daily bath has become a welcome ritual that I look forward to, especially, since it has turned cold. The bathhouse is the only heated room. Mahadev, the servant boy, sets the big copper pots of water to heat for our baths. The heat from the fire makes the room quite cozy. Evidently, I took too long the first day because the Swami told me that he was glad I took such a long time cleaning myself. However, in order for him to keep on schedule, he decided that he would bathe first in the future.

“Should I give you a nice rough cloth to rub down with?” he notes on his clip board. Before I even answer, he disappears and returns with a square bright orange wash cloth and hands it to me.
“But don’t ever put it in the bucket with the hot water,” he cautions. The “unclean” of the china cup phenomenon rears its head in diverse ways.

While we are on the subject of cleansing, with a rather casual look on his face, he writes, “Do you do the Ganesha *mudra* [hand position]?”

“I have never heard of the Ganesha *mudra*,” I confess.

“You have to cut the fingernail of the middle finger of your left hand [the unclean one] very short. You

use it to clean out your rectum each morning.”

“You clean out your rectum each morning with your finger....?”And he is worrying about a wash cloth in a bucket of water?

“Yes, you need to keep the colon track as clean as possible.”

“Somewhere I did read an article connecting a clean colon and spirituality. Frankly, I did not give it any attention. But I don’t think it mentioned this particular technique.”

“You must do it daily.”

For several mornings I have noticed that the servant ladies give the Swami a foot massage. Since the Swami’s asthma is getting progressively worse with the bad weather, I show him a reflexology foot chart and volunteer to work on his feet. I massage them for some 15 minutes, giving particular attention to the lung area. To my surprise, afterwards, he insists upon reciprocating.

He seems to grab my foot with too much fervor, but I remind myself: *I am not the body*. Then I close my eyes and try to relax because the massage is much too vigorous to be enjoyed.

The next evening is unusually damp and windy. Because of the moisture, the Swami is wheezing so badly from asthma that he does not even attempt to do the *yoga* exercises. Fortunately, today he received a package from a devotee in Bangalore containing some ayurvedic medicines for asthma. He is wondering about taking them, and I advise him to do so immediately. Then I relate to him Vani’s successful story of curing her asthma with herbs.

“Anyway, you have nothing to lose,” I console him. The truth is that he is wheezing so badly, I am concerned whether he will make it through the night.

Lo and behold, the next morning he is fine; only an occasional cough remains. He does continue to take the herbal concoction three times a day as prescribed. The following morning at *yoga*, you would not have known he ever had asthma. He remains well during the entire month that I am here in spite of the cold damp rainy weather, which refuses to go away.

In the evenings after *yoga*, we continue to exchange foot massages. Later, he wants to show me a head massage technique that he learned in Japan. Grabbing me around the neck from behind with one arm, he begins to scrub my head with overwhelming vigor. Again, I have to remind myself continually, *I am not the body*. I feel as though I have put myself in the hands of a psychopathic killer. However, he refuses to allow me to massage his head. The next night, he is extremely sleepy, so we skip the head message session. In a way, I feel relieved, yet there is something strangely appealing about this stimulation to my brain circuitry.

“Which do you like better, the *yoga* or foot massage?” the Swami asks me one evening while we are munching on our daily bread.

“Well, I probably like massage better, especially the headscrubbing, now that I have gotten used to it. I think it stimulates my brain—something that I certainly find it beneficial on these cold lethargic days. But I think that the *yoga* is probably better for health, that’s why it’s so hard for one to keep it up alone.”

“Yes, even I will go for long periods without doing the *yoga* when there is no one here to do it with. It does help to have company. You must find someone to do the exercises with when you return home,” the Swami suggests.

“I have my own theory of how to distinguish a good habit from a bad habit. If it’s easy to get and difficult to break, then it is a bad habit. If it’s hard to get into the routine, and is broken easily, even by missing a single day, then it’s a sure sign that it is a good habit. Now would our esteemed Swami like to explain to me why nature works against us in this way?” I query him.

“You must remember the role of the three *gunas* [modes of energy]: dull, active, calm. One or the other will always predominate. No need to be concerned about which one is playing its role in your life at any given moment.”

After a thoughtful pause, he continues, “Are you humming like I suggested? We must continue to feed the fire and fan the flame.”

“I fear that when I sing because I am feeling dull, I am trying to escape from the dullness. Krishnamurthi says stay with the feeling until it dissolves.”

“Don’t escape. Just be with the dullness, and sing anyway. Don’t be concerned if the dullness is there, or if it goes.

“Live one moment in that thought-free state, then the next one moment, and continue one moment at a time. Remember what I told you, the Christian fathers said: ‘If you are free of thought, you are free of sin.’”

Plop. Plop. Plop. My rubber sandals slap the asphalt road, wet from last night’s rain. Elephants passed during the night and left their unmistakable turds: tank shells of dried roughage with every ounce of juice sucked out. A young child waves to me from a small thatched hut surrounded by maize. Only green is visible up ahead, decorated with pink and orange lantana. A bird greets me every four or five feet. I stop to admire a wild variety of tiger lily that is half yellow and half orange. Upon a closer look I discover that a tiny yellow-breasted honey-sucker is clutching the stem; he is almost buried inside the blossom.

The *ashram* and village are surrounded by deep trenches, ten-foot deep and ten-foot across, to protect them from the elephants. One villager told me that the elephants are only here during the summer (March, April, May), but no one else seems to agree with him. However, everyone does agree that the elephants only come out to forage at night, so it’s not likely that I will see one.

Occasionally, a local farmer comes to bring fruit to the Swami, so I take the opportunity to find out more about this area. He cultivates mulberry leaves to feed the silk worms at a local silk factory. The gentleman tells me he has to sleep on his property at night since he cannot afford to have elephant trenches dug. He uses a lantana and cactus fence to keep out cows and even larger animals. In spite of the fact that the elephants are supposed to be deep in the jungle during this season, they are coming to drink every night in a small pond across from the gate, the most vulnerable spot in his fence. He has to be on the alert to divert them as they would destroy his whole crop in just one feeding.

“Sir, just how do you divert elephants?” is my obvious question.

“Oh you just scold them, then they will go.”

I am not convinced, “How do you scold an elephant?”

“Oh, you just say, ‘Haahh, haahh,’ and turn them aside.”

However, the elephant trenches do not ward off the tiger, bear, panther and leopard that also roam these hills. Unfortunately, neither do they slow down the marauding wild boars that visit the neighboring maize fields every night. Each morning, I see stalks of maize strewn along the road. The tribal people, including the young boys, take turns beating pots all night to frighten off these hungry, destructive creatures. They even got into the *ashram* grounds once and uprooted a couple of small banana trees.

One disadvantage seems to be developing from the Swami’s return to health; he has more energy for his various projects. He is putting together a booklet, named *Flowers*, which will contain a collection of his ideas on various subjects. He envisions this wisdom as his opus magnum and has a special cover in three-colors on glossy stock already printed and waiting for the text. One evening, he gives me two articles on

“happiness,” which he has previously published and has decided to include in *Flowers*. He asks me to go over them, as he wants the English to be perfect. From previous editing projects here, I know that he only wants confirmation that what he has written is great. However, in my quick scan I do find a couple of small corrections. One article includes the sentence: “When one comes to feel the serene joy and sense of limitless freedom, he or she feels too ill to bother about anything else in life.”

I comment that “ill” does not seem to convey the intended meaning, that perhaps “content,” or “detached” would be more appropriate. I go on to mention that the problem is since the normal meaning of “ill” is “sick,” the reader might be confused and assume a negative connotation. The Swami jumps up and runs to a locked cabinet and pulls out a thick dictionary. Upon looking up “ill,” he pores over the long list of possible meanings, then slams the book down in front of me. Accompanied by his usual groans and grunts, he points to a meaning that is number seventeen: “unpropitious.”

“Sir, you can hardly expect your reader to know the seventeenth meaning in some obscure dictionary,” I comment, although he is gesturing and aahing that “ill” is the right word. “Anyway, as I’m sure you know, ‘unpropitious’ only means ‘inauspicious.’ If you want it to have a positive connotation, as I think you do, it still does not fit your context. Perhaps, ‘detached’ is more appropriate.”

He then thumbs through his dictionary huffing and puffing in an excited manner to look up “detached,” as if the whole world depended on it. He finally comes up with“disinterested,” which we both agree fits fine. The thought does flicker across my mind that my life was easier when he was “too *ill* to bother about anything else in life.”

Previously, I spent all day outside, until 7:00 p.m., when I went for *yoga* and dinner with the Swami. Now I listen to the groaning of the wind in the trees on the ridge and recall that when I first arrived I thought it was the rush of a waterfall. However, someone is happy with the weather. The frogs are out chirping their spring song. They are everywhere. One morning I discover a small frog in the toe of my muddy tennis shoe, another behind the broom. Yesterday, one hopped through the drain in the bath house to join me while I was bathing. The drain is a horizontal hole to the garden outside and is plugged up immediately after use.

On the third day of my voluntary incarceration in my room with shutters closed to deter the wind, rain and fog, the Swami asks me, “Do you feel cold and lonely there?”

I explain that I am used to being alone. However, I am beginning to feel dull and lethargic without my usual long walks. Wrapped in my down sleeping bag (remember, this is August in India), I end up spending the whole day reading. Fortunately, I packed along some books because the Swami’s books remain in locked cabinets. So far, I have read a collection by Aldous Huxley and a sociological study on a south Indian village.

One afternoon when I bring my stainless steel tea tumbler back to his veranda for washing, the Swami is out on the porch sorting lettuce seed. One rarely finds lettuce in India, but this is the perfect climate to grow it. He asks if I will come back in 15 minutes to help plant the seed. I agree, but as I turn to leave I inadvertently knock one of his wooden sandals askew. Automatically, I start to carefully push it back into place with the same foot that knocked it.

“Uh-uuh,” he thunders his disapproval. He grabs his pad and scribbles: “You are not to touch them. Especially with your feet.”

“But, Swamiji, I inadvertently knocked the sandal, so I am only putting it back where it was.” Then I mischievously bow toward the sandals and then touch my heart a couple of times, imitating the gestures of the native women.

“I’ve seen *swamis* get very angry when someone even touched their sandals,” he retorts.

“So have I,” I respond sweetly. He keeps his head down so I cannot see his face, but I bet he is laughing.

His anger is always short-lived.

One of the Swami's ideas for meditation is to meditate with the eyes open. His reasoning is we should be able to be in a state of equal-mindedness through the activities of the day. You can see in such a way that the universe looks through you. Another way he describes the practice is looking at the world with the innocence of a baby.

After sitting in meditation, he asks: "What impressions do you get looking at my face?"

"Very calm, very peaceful."

"Apart from that, do you feel that I am experiencing something inwardly?" he inquires further.

"I'm not really perceptive enough to judge that."

"We must live as an instrument of God's peace. 'Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace' were the words of St. Francis. To live in a state of perfect harmlessness and non-interference is living peace. In Sanskrit there is a saying: *Dukha vasam; sukha prati;* that is, 'the ending of sorrow is the attaining of happiness.' One does not have to work for happiness; it is enough to end sorrow."

"In this world 'ye shall have tribulations' whether you are enlightened or not?" I suggest.

"Yes, but it is different. When your mind is as transparent and cloudless as empty space, where is any suffering?"

"So all I have to do is lose my mind. Sounds threatening to an American."

"Christ said: 'He who loses shall gain.'"

Having exhausted our thoughts for the moment, we sit in silence, which we often do. We feel no need to communicate and are content to be with our own thoughts—or silence. After some time, the Swami picks up his pen.

"Let me speak [write] my heart to you, Nancy. My only wish is that people should be able to grasp our universal teachings and live good and noble principles in their day-to-day lives. Excepting this, I have no plans, no ambition, absolutely no desire for name and fame.

"Since you have read our writings and have crossed our path, please take this as your own mission in life and try to do your best in fulfilling this mission as yours, not mine."

"But, Swamiji, I don't want a mission. Although I am so grateful that Swami Chinmayananda came to California so I could come to know Vedanta, in the end, I really have to question these *swamis* who spend all their time running around the world, trying to save souls. Some of them are becoming as unpeaceful as the Christian missionaries they imitate. More and more, I am realizing that your peaceful life, far from the maddening crowd, is the best solution for me."

Every afternoon, I have to carry an umbrella to put out the seed for the doves. I can no longer see them through the open door while doing the *yoga* exercises; only little billows of fog creeping into the door are visible.

I really miss my walks; furthermore, I need some exercise. So one morning when there is only a light mist, I borrow the Mahadev's big umbrella to go out for a walk. Not a creature is stirring. Everything is silent; only an occasional call of a lone bird echoes in the gray forest. Even the tribal village next to the *ashram* remains quiet. For fear that a downpour may start any minute, I do not dare enter my favorite haunts in the jungle.

The yellow butterflies that usually dot the tall lantana bushes are not to be seen. Where do all the butterflies go when it rains? I have to stick to the paved road as the grass is glistening with rain drops. Although I walk for almost an hour, not one person or vehicle passes me.

In spite of the gloomy weather, the Swami remains his cheerful self and our daily discussions continue. In addition to his spiritual pursuits, the Swami likes to keep himself informed of current events. He subscribes to *Time* magazine, as well as several anarchist publications. But his worldly education is not complete.

“Is AIDS transmuted by oral or anal sex?” he inquires one day. After taking a moment to recover from the shock, I give him what little technical information I have on the transmission of AIDS.

“I understand that oral sex is quite common now,” he continues.

I am feeling a little queasy, so I cut him off with the comment: “I don’t know; I never asked anyone.” Then I counter his questions on sex by asking him if he has ever been intimate with a woman.

“No! Never!”he insists with a stern hand signal.

“But you were in Italy for three years in the British army and did all that traveling later. You were not yet a monk.”

“But I was very shy. . . . Besides I was a Puritan. My own *Guru*—he was enlightened all right, I’m sure of that—but he had this weakness.”

“When one takes the vows to become a *sannyasi (swami),* does one state that he will remain celibate?” I question.

“No, not at all.”

“So technically speaking, when a Hindu *swami* has sexual intercourse, there is no breaking of any vows?”

“No, he is not breaking any vow, but that does not mean that his behavior is condoned by the majority. However, most will not condemn him for the behavior; they just accept the fact that he has a weakness,”he explains.

“I can see that is nothing to condemn per se. Yet somehow I feel that there is something intrinsically wrong with it. I know it can be my Puritanical conditioning; perhaps, I’m wrong in being critical of what is simply human behavior.”

One evening a young man, around twenty years old, arrives from Bangalore to stay for a couple of days. He had met the Swami on a hiking trip here last year and had returned to visit him on several occasions. This trip Sunil brought a poem by Lao Tze in which the Chinese master had commented that, though he never moved from his hut, the whole world came to him. After reading it to us, Sunil comments that it reminds him of our Swami. At that moment we are eating our usual bread and marmalade dinner.

“So you too think our marmalade is better than the store-bought mixed fruit jam? Is our bread better?” the Swami overtly fishes for compliments.

Before we can answer, he continues, “Every word in that poem is applicable to me. Will it be a good idea to print it on our new ‘peace on earth’ slip?” He turns to me as he finishes writing.

“I don’t know. Don’t you think it might make you look egotistical—saying, ‘look at me; I’m like Lao Tze.’”

Surely, he knows by now: If he asks for my opinion, he will get it. I keep hoping that he will quit asking, for even the gods know I can never keep my mouth shut.

"So I am living that life already, so there is no need to say so. Don't you think just sitting here [like Lao Tze], I do more good than going around the country 'disturbing the peace of others' like all those traveling *swamis*. Don't you think I live more like the *rshis*?"

"But each has his own place in the worldly *samsara*—each according to his own nature, as Lord Krishna put it. There is where I think Swami Chinmayananda is so wise. He says we must take our unique innate talents, which ordinarily would be working toward one's personal material gain, and put them to work in service of humanity. That's what he has done so incredibly in his life. If he were sitting up here alone all these years like you, he would have cleared the whole forest with his dynamic energy. Yet this life seems to be perfect for you. Both of you have truly found an environment that is perfect for your *vasanas*, innate tendencies, in the world."

"Well put: Each has a little place in the world," he writes.

"Except me, it seems. You are doing what you do best and he is doing what he does best. You both are very encouraging models that there are people who have exactly matched their situation with their *vasanas*. That's what I wish I could do," I observe.

"As long as you are in the world, in whatever profession, there is exploitation of others. The life of the *sannyasi* is the only exception. If we are given to, we accept; if not, we do not grumble."

"Of course, there are all types of *sannyasis* in India. It is not like one has to fit into a mold. There is not even a standard robe, and certainly no Pope or board to dictate orders."

"You're right. When I traveled around India I saw a lot of variety. I even spent a day or two with those beggar-*sadhus* in Benares. They begged their food, then brought it all together."

"Already cooked or uncooked?"

"Already cooked. Unless a *sadhu* is confined to one place because of the rainy reason, he only takes cooked food. They mixed it and ate it. But after I ate the concoction, I started vomiting. It was awful."

"So you were in Benares too?" I question.

"Yes, I traveled all over India before I settled here."

"Do you know of some sect in Benares of which it is said that they eat the flesh of the corpses in the cremation ground? I understand that it is to imitate Lord Shiva, the destroyer deity," I question him.

"Now that sect is almost extinct, since they are also celibate monks. There used to be a similar place in Gujurat state. These types are called '*agora panthi*.' *Agora* means 'horrific'; *panthi* means 'one who walks that path.'"

"So they renounce life by focusing on how horrible it is. I've heard in some parts that it's even considered best to take the *sannyasa* vows at a cremation site. It's amazing the myriad of ways life has manifested in Bharata. Of course, it's partly because the old never changes. The new is always being added on, impinging and expanding, but the old remains intact, even though there is definitely no pressure to conform to the mold."

After a moment's thought, I remember another curiosity. "What about those *nagas* who run around with only a few ashes smeared on their body? Have you ever had any contact with them?"

"Of course, I know of them. They practice the breath of fire, so that keeps them warm. No doubt, it gets awfully cold in the Himalayas where they live."

"Is it a really a spiritual sect?" I question him.

"Not what you would call spiritual, for they have no philosophy. But by conquering their physical bodies,

they often develop certain *siddhis*, supernatural powers. They can use their *siddhis* to help others in danger, or in illness, I suppose."

"From reading Swami Rama's *Living with Himalayan Masters*, I surmise there still be some incredible *yogis* living in the Himalayas. Not that one would be able to find them, or even be able to know who is authentic or not."

However, it's clear that I will never become a *yogi*. I am meditating less since I can no longer sit out on the veranda each morning. That environment was really agreeing with me. I make a mental note not to return to the Nilgiris in August. Instead of the sitting meditation, I try to keep a meditative mind, or what I would call an expanded alert mind, whenever I am walking, even the short trip to the out-house.

Each day the Swami asks about my progress with meditation. One evening when he asks how I am progressing, I reply, "Quite well, almost blissful. But, Swamiji, I definitely do have a hang-up. Really at times I feel incredible waves of bliss, but only when I am alone. I will never let another person see it. I keep it a private matter."

Chapter Nineteen

Contradictions and Inconsistancies

After two weeks, Swami Brahmadev arrives back at the ashram. By now I have heard enough about him from the Swami to be curious. A young man, about thirty-five years old, I find him quite kind, friendly, and intelligent. Fortunately, it is not raining on the day he arrives, so he can easily move his possessions from the guest cottage where I am staying to his new cottage. The charming structure, a circular shape with unique boxed windows—with glass—was specially designed for him by an architect friend. The Swami had complained to me about the expense of building the cottage, for Brahmadev had ended up spending twice what he had originally estimated.

As Brahmadev is packing up his belongings, I leave the door open because I think a young monk would not want to be behind closed doors with a woman. I am surprised when he insists that the door be closed. When I question why, he assures me there is a danger of snakes and scorpions entering if the door is left open. Then he expresses concern as to whether the electrical connection to his *kutia,* cottage, is functioning yet, as he has to have an outside light.

“What for?”I innocently inquire. ”I haven’t needed to turn my porch light on a single night.”

“Well, you should, in case any snakes or scorpions are there.”

As he is leaving with his last load of books, he turns toward the Swami’s glass-doored, locked bookcases that line the back of the wall.

“I don’t understand why a Swami would have such a collection of dolls,” he comments.

“They seem to be from all over the world. I bet he collected them when he traveled after the war,” I venture an explanation.

“But why would he want to keep them?”

“Contradictions and inconsistencies; that’s India,” is all I can answer.

That evening just as I enter the Swami’s *kutia* for our regular 7:00 p.m. *yoga* exercises and dinner, Brahmadev gets up to leave with the comment: “Swamiji allows no one in his cottage after 7:00 p.m. under any circumstances.”

Since I am accustomed to arriving at 7:00 p.m. for *yoga* and dinner, I stop still in my tracks. The Swami motions me to sit down, so we go through our usual routine.

Physically, Brahmadev is quite a hunk of a man. Like any good *Brahman* should, he rises while it was still dark for his daily ablutions. Each morning when I go to the out-house, I can barely discern his form in the predawn fog, as he does fifty push-ups against a stone bench.

Brahmadev is a swami in the *Arya Samaj,* Society of Aryans, founded in 1875 by the north Indian Swami Dayanand. He aimed to transform Hinduism from within by removing such extraneous, and often difficult to rationalize, elements as the *Puranas*,the epics that tell of the exploits of the various deities.

He also created a ritual whereby persons can be converted to Hinduism. This was not for the purpose of proselytizing, but a necessary measure to enable Hindus to be reinstated in good faith back into their

own religion. Many had converted to Islam for political expedience or had crossed the “black waters”(left the sacred soil of Bharata) for education, as both Gandhi and Nehru had done; however, these two dignitaries remained outcastes for the remainder of their lives. Gandhi could not even enter the home of his aunts or uncles, brothers or sisters after returning from England.

Today the *Arya Samaj* has originated many community projects. Brahmadev just officiated at a mass wedding of young couples who would not have been able to marry because of the high cost of weddings and dowries. The organization furnishes the hall, the priests and provides a feast for the occasion.

I truly admire Brahmadev for the social work he is doing. Again, it seems he has found a life that suits his personality and incredible energy. He does not waste his energy hiking in the forest, like I do. When he finds out about my expeditions into the forest, he is aghast. He begins to call me Swamini Abayananda, “the fearless one.”It is both a joke and a compliment, for it is written that one who can overcome all fear is as good as enlightened.

He has only been back two days, but I have already noted that Brahmadev is quite talkative, and quite curious about everything. One day, referring to the Ganesha temple in the ashram compound, he asks me, “I don’t understand why a *sannyasi* has a temple.”

“Oh, he must think that he’s helping the tribals.”

“Nancy, they don’t worship Ganesha. They just worship a stone in a field, or that tree. Don’t you know about their sacred tree?”

“Yes, I do know of it, although I haven’t visited it because the Forest Officers caught up with me through Nagamani and told me I have to have an armed guard to go there. I’m sure the tribals never have an armed guard!”

“I know. The officers also told me to tell you to stay out of the jungle. They have been very frustrated because they can’t speak English to tell you themselves.”

“Renunciates with temples; sacred trees with armed guards. Contradictions and inconsistencies; that’s India for sure—but it wasn’t Bharata.”

Every day my tropical paradise continues to wilt. The bright blue morning glories are usually open by 8:00 a.m., but when I pass by at noon to return some editing to the Swami, they have already given up on the day and remain crinkled up. Brahmadev happens to be sitting with the Swami when I enter his *kutia*.

When I hand the paper to the Swami, Brahmadev asks, “What is that?”

They then begin speaking in Kannada, so I assume the Swami is explaining. Later Brahmadev tells me, “Swamiji, told me it is none of my business, or rather, none of my *karma* [work].’”

I take note that the Swami observes *mauna* only in English. But not entirely, one afternoon, I happened upon him speaking in English with Mrs. Rao, the wife of the temple priest.

I had met her last week when I needed to mail some letters. I took the main road up to the tiny Post Office beside the temple. To make ends meet financially, the head priest of the Ranganatha Temple, Sri Rao, also serves as the local Post Master. Interestingly, he seemed to know who I was.

“We are all wondering how you are managing to stay with that Swami who wears his anger on his nose.”

“So you have had some encounters with him?”

“Oh, yes. He is very demanding about his mail service.”

“Well, at times he is challenging, but I think that he has his heart in the right place. He just gets carried

away with his projects."

I had not noticed, but evidently Sri Rao had sent a young boy to his house, for his wife appeared to invite me to their home for a cup of hot milk. When I step into their modest home, I know the sacrifices many *Brahmans* are making in "secular"India. Not that the temple *Brahmans* in the villages ever had much wealth, but neither did the worshippers. However, the priests used to have respect as the scholars, teachers and advisors in their communities.

At this time, sixteen pages of the forthcoming book, *Flowers* arrive from the printer. The Swami had been plying me with questions about printing, publishing and pricing. Now he asks me to look over the pages and make a list of any corrections I would recommend. Dutifully and carefully, I read the pages. Then I write a letter to the publisher with a list of my suggestions. When I read it aloud to the Swami and Brahmadev, they both enthusiastically agree with my suggestions—they declare the letter is perfect.

"Tell him [the printer] I concur with all points," the Swami notes on his pad. But when I ask for his typewriter to type it out, he gives me his "not now" hand signal.

Later, when I ask again, I add, "Should I just send my handwritten copy?" as I am getting the distinct feeling that he does not want me to touch his typewriter.

Finally, he scribbles: "It is too late to do anything about it."

"No, Swamiji, these are just the proofs; they can still make changes. They would not have sent them to you to check if it still were not possible to make changes. They can definitely change the paper stock from this cheap stuff, so thin that the impression of the letters nearly cuts through. It is incompatible with the nice glossy cover you have already printed."

"You don't know what you are talking about. You are talking like a mad woman," he scribbles on his pad. Then he jumps up and runs to one of his locked cupboards and pulls out the evidence: a stack of printed pages. The Swami has the first half of his book, 500 copies, already printed up in his cupboard. He's right; nothing can be done now. However, I fail to see that I am the one who is mad. But I'll reserve judgement.

Brahmadev has brought one welcome change: The food is better. He cooks a special dish for us at both breakfast and lunch. When I ask Brahmadev how it is that a traditional *Brahman* boy knows how to cook so well, he replies, "I like to be proficient in everything. In that way, I do not have to be a slave to anyone."

Later the Swami informs me that Brahmadev had been a chef in a luxury hotel in Delhi before taking the orange cloth of renunciation. The next morning while we three are having breakfast, the Swami chants a Sanskrit verse that sends them into peals of laughter.

Then he writes out the translation for me:

> In regard to offerings:
> Decoration is pleasing to Lord Vishnu,
> Lord Shiva enjoys a bath,
> Lord Sun prefers prostrations, and
> *Brahmans* like food.

"*Brahmans* love food; that is the reason that one gets the best food in the *Brahman* hotels," the Swami explains.

At that moment, Mahadev comes in with some *uppama* for me cooked by the ladies. Yesterday I happened to mention that I liked it, not knowing that the ladies make it for their breakfast every

morning. The Swami told them to make some extra, so I could have some too.

Uppama is made from *sooji*, India's cream of wheat, but this batch has a strange brownish color. "Well, I don't think this is *Brahman uppama*," I remark.

"She does have a good eye, doesn't she?" laughs Brahmadev.

Uppama is one of my favorite Indian foods; it's great for breakfast or *tiffin*, a snack. It does keep in the frig well for a day or so, but, like all Indian food, it's best fresh. And it's easy to make. For *Brahman Uppama*:

Measure:

1 cup of cream of wheat.
Roast it dry in a dry skillet over a medium low heat for 10 minutes, or until you can smell an aroma coming from it. Stir it constantly so that it doesn't brown.
Remove cream of wheat from skillet and set aside.

Meanwhile, put into a suace pan:
 2 1/2 cups of water
 1/2 tsp. salt

Bring to a boil.

Place in warm skillet over medium heat:
 3 tablespoons oil, preferably coconut oil
 2 tablespoons of urad dal (available at Indian stores)
 4 tablespoons of chopped raw cashews

After one minute, add
 1/4 tsp. whole jira (cumin seed)
 3 tablespoons shredded coconut
 3 tablespoons white raisins

When ingredients are slightly browned, add:
 4 or 5 fresh curry leaves (available at Indian stores)
 1 cup roasted cream of wheat

Immediately, stir in vigorously the 2 1/2 cups of boiling water
Add more water, if needed, to make a soupy paste, without any lumps.

Cook and continue stirring until water is absorbed and the mixture takes on a dry, clumpy texture (about 3 minutes).

Cool for a few minutes, then stir in
 1 tablespoon chopped fresh coriander leaves

Enjoy!

Neither Brahmadev nor the Swami will eat food cooked by the tribal ladies. Mahadev has to cook food for the two swamis because he is a *Brahman* also, although from a lower sect. His family lineage is the caste of temple servants who perform menial tasks, such as polishing the lamps, tending the cows, and cooking the *prasad*.

I comment that their concepts are just the opposite of ours. The Swami has the fresh vegetable salad (an influence from his European days) cut up by the tribal women, who may not have clean hands, so we would be hesitant. However, we would have no problem eating food cooked by them, since it would be

sterilized by the heat.

I know that this prohibition of eating food cooked by a lower caste person comes from the belief that the subtle vibration of the cook enters the food through *Agni*, fire. There's even a story about a monk who had dinner at the home of a wealthy devotee. Somehow the guest could not resist the temptation of stealing the gold goblet that held his water. Five kilometers down the road, he came to his senses, retraced his steps and returned the goblet to the owner. He apologized and explained that he just did not understand what came over him. When the owner investigated the cook, he found the true culprit. The cook was really a notorious thief who cased his victims by working as their cook. His "thief" vibrations had entered the food that the monk had eaten.

Brahmadev enlightens me further on the eating habits of some *Brahmans*. It seems at a temple in Brindavan, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, the priests compete for the record of who can eat the most *burfi*, a candy made of condensed milk and sugar. The record now stands at 15 kilos consumed at one sitting. The challenge: any pandit who eats 2 kilos of *burfi* receives 500 rupees, afterwards he receives 500 rupees. for every additional kilo consumed. The connoisseur who managed to gorge the 15 kilos earned 7,000 rupees. for his efforts.

"Of course, he would have vomited it up afterward, I was told," Brahmadev concludes the story.

One evening the Swami again consults me on the wording of the donors' names on the stone slab that will be part of the base of the Bambi statue. His face lights up at my suggestion, giving my head his usual tap of approval with his clipboard.

Then he writes: "You have some very good ideas, and I appreciate them. However, I do not have to use your suggestions. That printing was already done; you were foolish to say it wasn't."

What can one say; there are many things that can invoke silence. I calmly get up, carefully roll up my mat, then pause to wish him "sleep well."

But the peace doesn't last long, the next morning the Swami comes running down the walk flaying his arms and hopping about in such a way that it looks like is his tail is on fire. The Indians often use the expression "hopping mad"; I am now beholding "hopping mad" in action. Since he does not have his clipboard with him, he cannot communicate the problem, but I do surmise that I'm the guilty party. When he points to my stainless steel tumbler on the window sill, his squeaks and squawks increase. I had inadvertently dropped the tumbler a few minutes earlier and he heard the crash from his porch. He motions and points out a dent in it; actually, there are several. From my veranda, I can look past the Swami and see the servant women lined up like three little birds, grinning from ear to ear, but I manage to stifle my laughter and take a serious stance.

"Swamiji, we *sannyasis* are not concerned about such small matters as a dent on a tumbler." I turn to my door as I say, "I have that editing of the brochure finished; I'll get it for you."

I end up appreciating this practice of facing another's anger, almost daily now, because I have always been one to quake at authority. Strangely, I am never affected by the Swami's anger, beyond the momentary shock. Since I am not emotionally attached to him, I do not mind what he does. I watch and am amazed that I do not react, nor feel any need to react. Then of course I am quite content doing my own thing: reading, meditating and walking, since it has started clearing up every afternoon now. I hope I can take this "accepting what comes without trying to change it" attitude home with me.

In the evening, I hear the chatter of many little birds and go out on my veranda to investigate. The tiny sun birds are settling for the night. They must be in a mating mood because they are darting, dipping and fluttering in pairs like butterflies. One swoops down to the ground and picks up a dry leaf almost as big as itself. I stand and watch in awe until they disappear into the brush at the edge of the compound. I never see them again.

A few days later the sun is shining in the morning. I don't want to miss a minute of it, so I take off early. The soft breeze in the trees is a cheerful, bristling background to the lovely melody of the *bulbuls*. Nature has painted these birds drably in gray, white and black, but in a moment of artistic abandon has added an accent of red at their ear and under their rump. Judging from the fresh dung on the roadside, the elephants must have taken over last night and used the road as their grand trunk highway through the full length of the village.

The intermittent sun and forceful wind have already dried the path through the jungle, except in the deep shade. I go along humming while feeling in my heart "what a beautiful world this is." As always, I have a keen eye out for birds and animals. I get so carried away that when I return the Swami has given up on me and already started doing the *yoga* routine.

I quickly sit down and start the exercises, while looking out the open double doors. "Oh, Swamiji, it is so nice to see the sunshine. Let there be more sunshine in our lives."

That evening, when as usual the Swami asks me how my meditation is progressing, I reply with a grin, "Definitely better today since we have some sunshine. Do you think enlightenment may be dependent on sunshine?"

"Yes. The sunshine of happiness. Just like the clouds seemingly cause depressing weather, our minds become gloomy because of the three predominate moods [dull, active, calm] that predominate at any given moment," he comments on his note pad.

"And the sun is always shining in spite of the clouds," I agree with him.

Normally, I leave his cottage immediately after breakfast, but one day I hang around to help get the vegetables peeled and chopped, ready for cooking, since lunch has to be ready by 11:00 a.m.

"Swamiji, you are as busy as a one-armed paperhanger." I tease him.

He usually chuckles at my Americanisms, but today he's too busy to bother. It's Saturday, so the local *sadhu* has already been here for his weekly donation of rice and *dal*. The masons who are building the cupola for the Bambi statue have come, eaten breakfast, and are now having coffee before starting their work. A family of tribals just arrived asking for food. The Swami is putting together some puffed rice and ready-to-eat dried *dal* on a plate to offer them immediately. He then personally places some provisions in the burlap sack they are carrying.

He allows no one to enter the store room, not even Mahadev. He daily picks out the vegetables to be cooked, measures out the rice, oil and even salt from his pantry. Since no one can touch the tea leaf or sugar, he always makes the tea personally. This is the first time I've been able to eye-ball his stove, electric, made in England. It's the only evidence of any British influence I've seen in B. R. Hills since I've been here.

Somehow all the sunshine and promise of my own cooking inspires me to song. I begin singing my version of "Lord of the Dance" while swaying and moving my hands as I sing. Then I begin to repeat the verse and start twirling in the tiny space of the kitchen. The Swami is delighted with the show and bobs his head and starts to clap his hands in tune with the melody.

"Dance can be *sadhana* too. It is an expression of ecstasy. Remember to keep a silent song alive in your heart."

I am tripping lightly as I leave his cottage and face the sunlight. I spread my arms and take it in. Ah, yes, enlightenment must be dependent on sunshine—that is why there are so many saints in India. It's all this wonderful sunlight.

I return to the kitchen at 10:45 a.m. to cook the vegetables. But just at the moment the green beans are at the bright green, crispy stage, some guests arrive. They must be important because the Swami is

beaming, cackling like a bird, and rushing around putting out straw mats. He's really at his best receiving guests. He even puts his special marmalade on the bread he serves as p*rasad*, blessed food, then generously passes out his precious bananas that he usually dispenses one by one.

I tell him I will go ahead and eat since the vegetables are at perfection. Familiar tastes on the palate. . . sheer delight. So give me some sunshine and crispy vegetables and I'm happy.

That evening after *yoga*, as usual we sit peacefully in silence for some ten minutes. Then he queries me, "Tell me, Nancy, are you enjoying your stay here? Nothing is lacking. Our daily routines, food, *yoga*, etc. All okay?"

"Yes, but I did really love to taste my own style of cooking: crispy vegetables instead of cooked to mush."

He responds via his pad, "Oh, my heart leapt with joy when I saw you dancing and singing. I felt you were dancing in ecstasy like an angel—not on earth at all—soaring high in heaven."

"Yes, but only in front of you. I've never dared allow myself to be blissful in front of another person before," I confess.

He has not allowed me to massage his feet since our dispute about *Flowers*. Or was it when Brahmadev arrived? Anyway, since he is in such a good mood, I ask him if he wants a foot massage.

"No, no," he insists.

"If you don't let me, I'll touch your sandals and hex them with my unclean foreign vibration," I tease him, as I roll up my mat start to leave for the guest cottage.

He cackles gleefully at my joke. He does have a great sense of humor and takes my occasional cantankerous remarks in stride. After all, he is having to make many adjustments himself. Like the night I clipped my nails in his room. I honestly did not know nail clipping was an unclean act. I was just waiting for him to finish in the kitchen, so I pulled out my nail clippers. Actually, he survived the clipping of the nails without a total hemorrhage. It was when I got up to throw the clippings outside that he came unglued—"hopping mad." Could you have imagined that one should not throw nail clippings, or any other trash, out after dark? Nor could have I, so I ignored him and told him not to be superstitious. After all, I couldn't keep such unclean trappings in my lap while I ate. In short, the Swami deserves plenty of credit for accommodating me in ways that I shall surely never know.

The following evening, the Swami is standing at the door of his cottage when I arrive for *yoga*. I had put the end of my *sari* over my head because of the cold wind.

As I enter, I mention, "In Hampi, everywhere I went, people would call after me: 'Indira.' I don't know why they had such a fascination for her."

"She was only playing with power." Then he writes out a Sanskrit *sloka* [verse]:

> Power, pregnancy, taking a loan,
> intercourse between dogs,
> in the beginning much joy and pleasure,
> but at the end so painful—even ending in death.

"Well, I've heard a lot of Sanskrit verses, but that one takes the cake." I can't keep from laughing aloud, although I doubt it was meant to be funny.

Later during our discussion time, the Swami starts writing, "You are already enlightened, but you do not realize it. In fact, you are face to face with God; yet you do not realize it. Be nothing; then you are everything."

"I know why I don't realize I'm enlightened. It's because I don't think a simple, ordinary, plain Jane like myself can be enlightened. I think it happens to someone special, very special."

"To know that there is nothing to gain, nothing to change, that is wisdom," he replies.

"But Swamiji, it can't be that simple."

"We only have to realize we are seeing God all of the time."

"So give up the idea of a great mystical union?"

"What is mystical union when all is THAT only?"

"That is a great answer," I chuckle gleefully. "You're right. For there to be a union, there must be two. So that's why Adi Sankarcharya and his Vedanta theory emphasizes the non-dual point of view. So really the enlightened have to deal with the same nonsense in the world as everyone else. It's just a change of attitude?"

"When rains come both the enlightened and unenlightened get wet. But the enlightened never get bothered. The rain comes; the rain goes."

"Okay, okay—I get it. If I say, 'I am enlightened,' it only shows my egoism. But if I say, 'I am not enlightened,' I am not speaking the truth."

"Aah."

Chapter Twenty

The People of the Sacred Tree

One morning the Swami tells me, “Sivamalliappa will take you to the temple.”

“Swamiji, you know I am not a temple person. Plus I visited Chidambaram, so I’ve seen the best.”

Since my past influences have been from two intellectuals teaching the philosophical ideas, I really have not had any contact with the more prevalent religious practices of the Hindus until this trip. Although the temples and deities are not a part of my personal spiritual journey, I have been open to investigating and learning about this phenomenon. Obviously, they have been a major factor in giving millions of people a common identity for thousands of years, so they must have some value.

“Just go and see,” the Swami insists.

“Okay.”

“You will have to take a coconut and incense.”

“They will have a stall to buy it there?”

“Aah.”

Sivamalliappa, a local boy who runs errands for the Swami, arrives early the next morning to accompany me on the short hike to the temple. I purchase the proper materials, a coconut, incense, bananas, and a flower *mala,* garland, from a little old lady on the temple steps. She weaves the *malas* of snowy white jasmine and bright fuchsia bougainvillea. Just using flowers growing around here, she has created one of the most beautiful *malas* I have ever seen. Carefully, I carry the splendid garland, certainly fit for a deity, as we begin our ascent up the 392 steps to the Ranaganathan temple. The entrance is not particularly ornate, but the deities must be made of precious metals. I surmise this as my foot hits the thick loop of iron at the threshold. Then my eye catches the heavy metal chain that must fit through the loop to secure the door against thieves and infidels.

I consciously place my bare feet on each granite step, worn smooth by the many pilgrims who have passed this way. After stopping to take in the tall wooden columns that decorate the entrance, I hesitate because most temples have a specific route to be followed to the main deity. Generally, Ganesha is worshipped first, in order to remove any obstacles to the success of the worship. Next in line is the consort of the main deity, since nearly all Hindu deities are in pairs of masculine and feminine. Only then is the worshipper mentally prepared to behold the main deity. I follow Sivamalliappa around and perfunctorily follow his instructions of when to hand over incense and coconut to the priest, when to give the bananas and mala for the consort, when to take the ash, and when it is polite to leave.

Some temples do emit a perceivable quiet vibration imbued through the centuries with chanting of the priests and devotion of the worshipers, but I do not detect anything special here. However, this temple, like many in South India, has a feature I can certainly appreciate: a grand view. In one direction I can see all the forest-covered hills down to the plains toward Mysore, on the other, the rolling hills, terraced gardens, and the lake where the elephants come to drink in the summer. After his foreign tour, Swami Vivekananda commented that in Europe and America when one finds a scenic spot on a mountain top, they build a hotel; whereas, here in India, the Hindus erect a temple on these places of special beauty.

Even after our disagreement over the *Flowers* publication, the Swami gives me a new assignment to write out a little inspirational slip that will accompany an official peace slip. I balk, insisting that he knows what he wants to say; furthermore, he is totally proficient in English. Further, I protest that it is foolish for me even to attempt to create something that he can do better.

My objections are arbitrarily overruled. The Swami insists: “I know that you are the right person to do it.”

Immediately, he gives me a list of suggestions of what he wants to be included in the piece. When he arrives with my tea the next morning, it is accompanied with a note of a couple more additions for the peace slip.

Since the weather has turned nice, I am back on my meditation pad for the two free hours in the morning. I am so glad to be back in my little peaceful place in the world. In my restless moments, I open my eyes and take in the beauty of nature; the waves of the undulating green against a blue sky. I feel content just observing, instead of hiking until I exhaust myself, which had become my pattern.

Early the next morning, while I am brushing my teeth on the verandah—Indians do not brush their teeth in the room for toileting or bathing—Mahadev arrives with a note. The Swami requests that I write out a nice piece, “incorporating all the main points by 4:00 p.m.”

I dutifully try to organize the notes that expand every time I see the Swami. Finally, I complain, “Swamiji, you have given me four or five pages of handwriting to be condensed into a piece for a 3 by 4 inch card. Now this is not an ordinary assignment. Look, Swamiji, you know what you want to say and how to say it. Why don’t you just write it out yourself?”

NO. He insists with a barrage of squeals and squawks. It appears that it has been ordained in heaven that I will write it. Then he scribbles out another one-half page of instructions.

During my short walk before breakfast, I start listening for the hum of Om in my heart. I discover a new trail with a small pond. A wonderful mountain pond—deep still calm reflecting water. I spot tiny frogs and tadpoles, swimming in its obscure depths. A breeze blows a design of fragile wrinkles across the liquid surface. Black lacy dragonfly wings glide by. I feel a sigh of contentment ripple through my body. A gentle breeze threads a string of remembrances of past contentment.

When I get up to return to the ashram, I find several iridescent black sunbirds feeding on flowers. *It’s going to be a good day today*, I think as I look out the door during yoga to watch tall branches dancing in the wind, while the lower limbs only quiver.

Afterwards, during breakfast, the Swami gives me a pep-talk and another sheet of instructions. When I have to face him at lunch, I again mention moving the two new lines or the introduction will be longer than the piece itself.

“Who will condemn us for it?” he rebuts my suggestion.

“You’re right. I don’t suppose anyone in India would condemn anything for being too long. I remember it was a common occurrence when Swami Chinmayananda was the guest speaker at different organizations, like the Rotary Club, that the person introducing him often took up half the time. On one occasion, a man, speaking in a native language that not even the Swami understood, took up the whole time.”

“Nevertheless, I am concerned that the type will have to be so small that no one can read it. Do you think everyone will have a magnifying glass available?” I am relentless.

I work all afternoon with stops and starts, but cannot get all the disconnected pieces into one nice bouquet. I note that the project has me so stressed out that I have not even meditated all day. One thing is clear: this damn peace slip is causing me to lose my peace of mind. I wonder if this is a lesson for me. The Swami is truly a special person, but not even he can remain quiet in this peaceful abode. He is

actually spending every waking minute fussing over his ”peace slip.”

Finally, I get the ideas summarized. First and foremost, it is supposed to portray the Swami as a personification of the two teachers whom he considers the greatest sages of this century: Ramana Maharshi (“savage-type dress,” “non-conformist”) and J. Krishnamurthi (“hippie-like message”).

Then I summarize the main points he wants me to incorporate about him personally:
1) He accepts whatever chance may bring.
2) His life of harmlessness seems to be a silent revolt against the existing evils of society.
3) He guides others to contact, recognize the peace in their own hearts.
4) A spiritual person has to live away from world.
5) Greed and competition create conflict in the society, that, in turn, produces war.
6) He purposely rejects the gadgets of society.
7) Like Krishnamurthi, he thunders against the pretensions of life.

Other important points to add:
1) The Swami’s lifestyle is the most intelligent way of living in this world of greed and competition.
2) After spending a lifetime working as a slave for others, for the sake of food and shelter, what have we accomplished at the end of a lifetime?
3) Realizing this dilemma, the Swami sits in a peaceful hut, quietly humming in peace with the universe.

At 6:00 p.m., I go to his cottage early with the stack of pages, half-pages, and small notes he has given me. “Swamiji, here are all your notes, along with a summary of all your ideas. I just cannot put it together into anything that flows nicely. I’ve tried, but for me it is impossible.”

The Swami is very quiet and never looks at me directly during yoga or while serving supper. We do not meditate as usual after yoga, for he immediately jumps up to bring my bread and milk.

As it turns out my last day at the ashram falls on a special holiday: Ganesha’s Day. As I am leaving Swami writes, “Tomorrow morning please come and help Brahmadev in the preparations for the holiday meal. Please volunteer yourself and ask what you can do to help. He has to prepare special items for us: jackfruit pudding and the vegetables. When Mahadev cooks the vegetables, they have no taste.”

“Now that is true. No matter what vegetables Mahadev cooks, they all have the same taste: zero. I wonder what his secret is?”

By 8:00 a.m. the next morning, the front verandah is astir with a big production. Five tribal women, Mahadev and an extra boy are busy working. It is pickle-making day too . Limes are cut into four pieces. A burlap bag’s measure of red chilies is roasted over the wood in a huge iron skillet fire, ground on the stone, then added to the limes.

I approach Brahmadev to help him with the vegetables. He corners me, “Did you see that? Why is a Swami making all those hot, spicy pickles? Even his brochure says he does not eat chilies.”

“Anywhere contradictions and inconsistencies abound, they become the norm. I’m simply not going to be bothered.”

For the Ganesha celebration, the Swami has invited the school children to the temple for a ritual and *prasad*, blessed food. Their little bright faces line the sidewalk waiting for the priest to come out with the sacred flame. Problem is, although the sun is shining, the wind is blowing so hard that he cannot get a damp (due to the rains) match to stay lit long enough to light the camphor. I do not know who the poor fellow is; I have never seen him before—nor afterwards. Anyway, I volunteer to help, by trying to block the wind. Somehow, in desperation, I end up with the matches in my hands, and finally light the camphor. We both take a deep breath to regain our composure. But our timing is perfect. Just as the priest begins to “show the flame,” the Swami arrives with puffed rice for me to hand out to the children for *prasad*, blessed by the Swami.

At dinner that evening, the Swami is still cold as a Siberian icicle. I feign that I think everything is normal.

He notes on his pad: “When will you be vacating? Brahmadev needs the room by 7:30 a.m. tomorrow morning because the painters will be starting work by then.”

“No problem. I told Mr. Rao at the temple guest house that I would be there early. He said that was fine. Then I will be in Bangalore for two weeks in case you need me to check anything at the printers.”

“Naah,” he gestures with a grimace. “You did not do the work we gave you here,” he writes on his pad.

“Swamiji, as we both know I helped you continually with your editing projects. I am sure that my not having the capacity to do this last assignment will not cancel out the other help I have given you. I’m sure you are not that kind of person.”

As I am speaking he is looking down, but I detect a smile on his face.

“Good-bye, Swamiji, I’ll drop by and see you before I leave Biligiri Ranga (B. R. Hills). I realize I cannot repay what you have given me in kindness, tender-loving care and spiritual guidance.”

At dawn’s first light, I am ready to start carrying my suitcase up to the temple guest house. I manage to carry my small, but very heavy, suitcase—containing my books—down to the main road. Then I luck out. Just as I reach it, a group of local men, probably tribals, are walking by. I gesture and pantomime (I have had some expert lessons from the Swami lately) to get one of them to carry the suitcase for me. Then I show them a 10 rupee note. They bobble their heads; they have understood. Then they banter among themselves to decide which one gets the job. Then a young strong one steps forward, hoists it up on his head and away we go for the twenty minute hike.

Coming back down the hill at full speed since I am empty handed, I head for the local restaurant for breakfast. Once Sivamalliappa and I had tea in the outer room where there are chairs, but I go into the dining room where the floor is plastered with the traditional cow dung paste. I know it’s hard to believe, but I have never once seen a fly on a cow-dung paste floor—and I have watched carefully. The lovely fluffly *idlis,* doused with fresh coconut chutney, are served on a green banana leaf. The owner/cook and his spouse are delightful, typical of the gentle simple country folk that you find in villages all over India.

“Madam, may I inquire where you are from?” a gentleman stops me with a question. It is the gray-haired man who I passed on the road earlier.

“I am from U. S.”

“You greeted me so nicely with a ‘namaste’ when I passed you this morning, but I did not know how to respond appropriately—with a good morning, a *bonjour,* or what,” he responds.

I often greet the villagers as I am walking as it disarms their shock at seeing my white face; in addition, it usually brings big smiles to their faces to be acknowledged. I particularly noticed this gentleman because he did not have the look of a local. However, his simple dress, a quality cashmere sweater that was worn at the neck and sleeves, along with his unshaven face threw me off. I forget that, traditionally, Brahmans only shave once a week. There is an injunction against touching a razor; actually, I think it’s just the cut hair, just like cut fingernails. By the way, this means that the barbers are polluted and are the lowest of the lowest caste, even lower than the *dobhi,* washerman. The barber travels around once a week to the villages. The shaving takes place under a tree, since the low-caste barber (along with the shaven hair) would not be allowed to enter a home.

When I comment on his command of English, the dignified gentleman explains that he had studied in England. At that time, his family had been the *Diwan* (ruler) of this entire region. The center of the district was at Yolander.

“Oh, so that is why there is such a palatial, although dilapidated, residence in Yolander. I saw it when I was there and thought it must have been the home of a *raja* or *nawab*. So you lived there when you were a child?”

“Oh, no. My grandparents had lived there, but we lived in Bangalore. It was more convenient for education, and was more comfortable. Mother would come to Yolander if there was some special occasion that required her presence and for the annual revenue collection.”

The next day we meet for tea on the verandah of the guest house I am staying in. First he tries to convince me that I should not be staying in the temple guest house. “It’s too quiet,” he insists. I tell him it’s fine for me since I love quiet, but he seems unsettled about it.

In every part of India, from the jungles to the deserts, indigenous tribal peoples exist who are considered to be the original inhabitants. Of totally diverse customs, they have remained outside of the mainstream of the society and culture. They are the *adivasis*, or first [*adi*] inhabitants, in contrast to the *harijans*, or untouchables, who lived in the populated areas, thereby suffering more exploitation and discrimination. I take the opportunity to ask him about the local tribals.

“Now these Soligas of this region are called a scheduled caste?”

“That’s correct. That’s the term for the tribals who have always lived isolated outside the society. However, because farmers are clearing their forest for tilling and planting of cash crops, they are being forced to come in contact with others. Obviously, the tribals have no deed to the forest they have lived in since no one knows when.” he explains.

“So without getting any benefits, the tribals are losing their forests that have sustained them through all the empires, wars and plagues. The Soligas subsisted principally by hunting and gathering?”

“At least in the last century, they were planters of maize and *raghi*, their millet. They used a method so that they continually moved from one place to the other, so they never depleted the soil. Neither did they cut the large trees, but always made an effort to save them.”

“So that’s why so much natural woods still exists around here.”

He goes on to explain, “Another problem is simple exploitation has begun even here. For example, huge tamarind trees grow in the forest. The merchants from outside have the Soligas pick all the pods for the market. Although he gives the tribals only a few rupees for their work, he may get a thousand for the crop from just one tree.”

“I wonder if the tribals use the tamarind for cooking like the south Indians do. Since they don’t eat *rasam* or *sambar*...”

“I doubt it. They have no idea that it could be of value to anyone. You see they are not accustomed to dealing with outsiders. When I used to come here with my mother in the 1920’s, if they saw us, the Soligas would run away,” he comments.

“Yes, the same thing happened to me the other day. A small child took one look at my face and started screaming as if he had seen a ghost,” I tell him with a smile.

It’s great to be on my own. First thing, guess where I head? Yes, the Soliga’s sacred tree. To get the exact lay of the land, I take the bus to the tiny village where I had wanted to return to see the baby elephants. It turns out to be a summer home of an ex-raja and is now available for rental, particularly for groups who want a quiet retreat and want to ride elephants. After looking around, I turn back to retrace the route to the signpost that I spotted from the bus for *Dodda Sampige,* the sacred tree.

However, before I have gone a half-mile, I am distracted by a dirt road that runs along a ridge off to the right. There appears to be a clearing ahead, so I take off to investigate. I find only a couple of mammoth

old trees that have fallen in the storms. As I turn around, I behold the most wonderful sight below me. There is a beautiful Soliga village with thatched huts and dirt lanes. Beautiful because it is laid out in exact rectangular pattern and sparkling clean. Made entirely of natural material, it's all surrounded with bright-green flora of the forest. I stand in awe at such simple grandeur.

My first inclination is to find a route down the ridge to visit it, but something holds me back. Here is one spot of human habitation that has never been invaded by an outsider. How can I, from a long line of barbarians [ie. Europeans/Americans], dare approach such a holy spot? Suddenly, I feel sure it would contaminate the hamlet immeasurably to have the vibration of a people who have fought among themselves in countless wars, even two world wars, to control the wealth of the planet. I suddenly realize the Old Testament must be a record of the arrival of the barbarians on the planet. We do not know where they came from, but we do know that they found people already here because Cain, Able and Seth found spouses for themselves. And we do know they brought war with them, lots of war—the Bible tells us so.

Quite contrary to that *modus operandi,* these Soligas have never fought with anyone. They have lived peacefully in this forest, never bothering anyone. . . or anything. In their tribal ethics, they consider cutting a tree as the greatest sin. In addition to their farming, they gather many roots and herbs for both nutrition and medicine, so, of course, they used techniques to preserve the stock. Unfortunately, the clans have a susceptibility for sickle cell anemia, for which they have not found a natural cure.

Literally, Soliga means "the one who came from within bamboo;" however, they have their own creation story. The deity Madeswara was passing through the forest, carrying a small *Champak* seedling. Setting it aside, he visited the nearby stream. When he returned, he found the tree had rooted, so he left it at that spot. That seedling has now grown into the two-thousand-year *Dodda Sampige.* The Soligas claim to be the descendants of one of this deity's two sons. So the Soligas are the children of the "Lord of the Great Champak Tree."

The deity is worshipped by placing smooth round stones at the foot of the tree. Among the stones are signs of offerings such as grains and flowers. To be in the presence of this sacred tree, which has been honored through the centuries, is completely overwhelming. To behold the wonder and beauty of this manifestation of nature is an act of worship. When I arrive at the tree, several Soligas have come to worship. They prostrate themselves at its feet and offer flowers. I follow their example, putting my knees in the damp sandy gravel of the river bed. The Soligas, curious and friendly, attempt to talk to me, but there's no hope for communication. By the way, I do not see a single wild animal either coming or going, so, as I suspected, the armed guard was not needed.

The next morning, I return to the jungle. First, I check to see if the yellow ginger is in bloom. The sun is shining and my orchid radar is at its peak. I find five plants, all easily attainable on felled trees or branches that have been blown down by heavy winds. Now there is only a gentle breeze to keep me comfortable, so I stop and climb up on my favorite boulder of granite. From my perch, I behold the wonders of this green, leafy paradise, then ponder how I ever managed to survive without it.

This morning on the main street, I met Brahmadev and he invited me to lunch since he is cooking today. En route, four or five cars pass me, for B.R. Hills is visibly astir getting ready for the Chief Minister's visit. When I pass the police station, usually totally dark and deserted, there are several officers loitering on the porch. One of them hollers down to me, "How long are you here?"

I answer the query crisply, "Just a couple of days." I have certainly been here long enough to know to avoid police paperwork whenever possible. The officer waves me on. Since he speaks English, I surmise he arrived with the Minister.

I reach the ashram at the usual lunch time to find both Swamis all smiles. They are both eager to find out how I am faring at the temple guest house. And what am I doing for food? I assure them that everything is fine. Then Brahmadev expresses his concern and tells me that, had he been in station, he would have advised me not to stay there.

"You mean because of the suicide? Sivamalliappa told me about that."

"And you can stay in that room?"

"Wait a minute. He did not say in the room. He told me that a young couple jumped off the precipice that the temple sits on because the boy's parents would not allow him to marry a tribal girl."

"Nancy, there was another suicide in the guest house itself. I think he was a married man. He and his girl friend stayed at the guest house. I think they were dead in their room for several days before anyone even thought to check on them."

"That must be the room that is pad-locked. Mr. Rao's brother had been staying in the room I am in, so I'm sure it is not the same room."

Brahmadev is still not convinced, "Are you sure it doesn't make any difference to you?"

"Why would it? I don't know them. I'm sure the temple priests did the purification rites to send their souls to the heavens."

Planning to start a little garden, I brought the orchid plants with me that I had found in the forest. After we ate lunch, I pull some stems of leaves off a banana tree to tear into strips to use as twine. Then I carefully tie the plants to the branch of a tree. Since the rains are bound to continue, followed by the cool winter, I feel sure they will be able to establish themselves.

That evening from my verandah in the guest house, I can see the parking area at the back of the temple. I had seen a bunch of cars there, which are now gone, so I assume the Chief Minister of Karnataka has come and gone. So I go over to the temple to see how the state visit went. It turns out the Minister has not arrived—an hour overdue. The occupants of the cars I saw were looking for the Minister. The priests and a few other well-wishers are feeling bored after an hour's wait. So I tell the two fellows who are waiting to play their flutes to go on ahead and play now for our enjoyment.

Their music is truly wonderful. Of course, I begin to dance. The music is soft, so my dance is soft—twirls, swirls and dips. In years gone by, the *devadasis* (servants of the deities) danced in temples, so it has been done before. Everyone else begins to clap their hands with the music, so we have a lovely, spirited time, since it turns out to be another hour before the Minister finally arrives.

I step back into the background to observe as the horns toot and the banners fly to accompany the Minister as he troops around the temple for the traditional circumambulation with his entourage. Then he enters the temple for *darshan* of the deity. Only pausing a moment to stuff some sweet *prasad* in his mouth, he is quickly back out at the entrance gate to plant the customary tree, by flashlight, since it is now pitch dark. The word is spreading that he was late because he was at the Swami's.

The following day I go by the Swami's cottage, as he had asked me to drop by in case he had some task for me. I am feeling quite happy as I walk down the familiar dirt road with a tribal village on one side and dense shrubs on the other. I enter the ashram gate and wind my way up the concrete path. I check my orchid garden, finding every one of them adjusting to its new home. Truly peaceful moments surround this beautiful place—I have not figured out if it is because of, or in spite of, the Swami.

I find him all abubble because of the Chief Minister's visit to his cottage. "He stayed here for an hour. I served him tea, my brown bread and cake," the Swami jots on his note pad.

"What did he say about the road?" I question him.

The Swami looks at me as if he had been shot. *He must think I am psychic,* I muse.

"How did you know about the road?" he scribbles in a fury, then he quickly composes himself.

I just smile and reply, "Well, you must have mentioned it. Is the Minister going to cooperate after all that tea and cake. . . and your blessings? You did give him your blessings, didn't you?"

“Hum.” He affirms. “He did assure me that he would be able to do something about the road.”

The Swami only needs me to change the typewriter ribbon, so I quickly retread it, then take off for a hike. I saw no need to tell him he had written me one of his notes on the back of his rough draft to the Minister. Of course, I read it. He had requested the presence of the Minister at his *kutia* during his impending visit. In addition, the Swami had requested that something be done about the condition of the road to his *kutia*, assurting that its bumpy condition makes it inconvenient for all the pilgrims who come to visit him.

The same Chief Minister is in the news a month later. Poor fellow had a massive stroke. The next day Rajiv Gandhi, in his role as leader of the Congress Party, arrives in Bangalore, not to console him, but to ask that he step down immediately. Even the Congress legislative members in the Karnataka State Assembly are shocked at their leader’s audacity. They form a coalition to support the Chief Minister until it is determined whether his health will allow him to continue with his duties. So politics in the world’s greatest democracy roll on.

Chapter Twenty-one

So Many Stories

A couple of gentlemen came to Biligiri Ranga at the Swami's request. He wanted their engineering advice on the little cupola that is being built to protect the Bambi statue. They have volunteered to drop me off inYolander. Since they want to leave right after lunch, I meet them at the local mud-hut restaurant. They adamantly refused to have lunch with the Swami. I assume they have experienced his unsalted, boiled vegetables previously, but I don't bother to ask them.

From Yolander, I will catch a bus for Mysore where I will find plenty of buses are heading for Bangalore. They think I will save some time, but I am considering the benefit of having a couple of breaks. After an uneventful trip down the mountain, for this is the shorter route, they drop me off at the Yolander bus stand. While waiting for the bus, I sit to have my usual cup of tea in the local snack shack. To my surprise, in walks the *Brahman* whom I had recently met. He is going to Mysore also, so he will have plenty of stories to entertain me on the journey.

He and his wife had lived in Hospet, the uninteresting town I visited last month, where he was a manager of a factory. They raised two daughters, who are happily settled—or at least he hopes so. He tells me that one is married and lives in Bangalore, while the younger one was contracted to marry an Indian living abroad, in Amsterdam.

"Well, you know there was not enough money for us to go there with her, and the groom could not get time off from work. So we packed her up and sent her off—you know a 'home delivery.' We never knew exactly what happened there. But we found out later that she was not living with him. She got a job and stayed there though." He casts his eyes downward as he thinks of her plight.

Surely, he knows what happened, but probably hopes that I do not. In an often repeated scenario, parents send their son off to Europe or America for an education. In spite of their protests, he gets a job and remains there. In the meantime, he falls in love and marries. Later, afraid to admit to his parents that he has married a foreign woman, he submits to family pressure to take an Indian bride. Often, he returns to India and even goes through the wedding ceremony. When he returns to Europe or U. S., he tells his first wife that he has brought a servant girl from India to do the cooking and housekeeping. He can get by with it since the bride will be much younger than the husband, and usually will not be able to speak English. Unfortunately, the groom's reluctance to tell the truth is partially because his greedy parents are eager for the dowry that comes with the Indian bride—men living in the U. S. command a higher price. Of course, neither is he eager to cause his family to become outcastes in their community, as in the case of the woman I met earlier.

Hari's sister suffered this same trauma in the early 1960's. Fortunately, the arrangement was also a "home-delivery," so there had been no marriage in India. When she arrived in California, since she was intelligent and spoke English, she was able to figure out right away that the groom was already married. At the time, she also had a scholarship to study at U.C. Berkeley, so she went ahead with her studies and carved out a life for herself as a professor. The blot on her character, although it was not in any way of her own doing, could have never been expunged in India.

I am called back to the present, as the gentleman goes on, "We all were trained and educated in England. They were actually holding us back and making us think that it was impossible for us to study in U.S. A few people went to train for a year or two with General Electric, but they were exceptions. Although the States was not much until after the war."

Then I mention, “You know I heard the most startling story. J.R.D. Tata, the Parsi magnate from Bombay, did study in U.S., in Pennsylvania, since the Tata’s were steel manufacturers. At that time, he visited Pittsburgh. He was shocked at the conditions he saw there. He took a vow that he would never subject his employees to such depravity. And he has kept his word. His factories have the best working conditions and employee support system, even medical service, in all of India. And all because he visited U.S. and saw the exploited workers. I think it’s amazing.”

“It is strange how unique influences form each one of us,” he comments, then continues with his personal history. “These same conditions for laborers also existed in England, but we all thought everything there was superior. No one dared criticized anything British.

“I studied in England in Christian College in 1936-37, then in an engineering college. You know in those years, when we returned home from London, say for a summer break, we could never wear English clothes or speak a word of English in our own homes. In most homes, in the South anyway, there was not even chair or a table. We still sat on the floor on our straw mat for meals.”

“Eating from a beautiful banana leaf.”

“Yes, from our disposable plates,” he chuckles.

As it turns out the ancestors of this dignified gentle-man had been the Ministers of a great Moslem Empire in south India. “My great-great-great-great grandfather was the minister of the monarch, Tippu Sultan.”

“I knew this was the tradition in old India; the kings deferred to the spiritual authority and guidance of a *Brahman* minister. However, I did not know that the Moslems adopted this practice also,” I comment.

“Oh, yes. There’s so much we do not know, for we do not have a true history of Tippu Sultan [1750-1799]. He was quite liberal in his views; under him, there was no persecution against the Hindus. All the histories of that time were written by the British, in most cases, Scottish soldiers. They were not educated in research techniques or writing historical accounts, so the history books are quite one-sided in their point of view.”

He continues, “When the British defeated the Sultan, they recognized his Minister’s governing ability and offered him the position of *Diwan* [Minister] of the state of Mysore. He did not trust the British, neither did he want to be put in a position where he would be pressed into some battle. He declined and asked them for a small kingdom where he could live out the rest of his days peacefully. The kingdom that he received was Yolander Taluk [District].”

For the sake of time orientation, after he was defeated in the American Revolutionary War, Cornwallis was made Governor-General and sent to India in 1780. He was a competent General and scored a victory against Tippu Sultan, even though Tippu’s army had been trained by the French in military tactics and included European mercenary soldiers. Interestingly, when Cornwallis was then made Governor-General, he was considered too liberal and sent back home.

I watch the sensitive face of this distinguished gentleman as he continues his story. “When the administration of Yolander Taluk passed to my immediate family, my father was already deceased. The district consisted of 28 villages; all the people were tillers of the soil. If there was a drought or crop failure, Mother would adjust the revenues through the income she had from her personal properties, so there was no burden on the villagers. Mother died when I was about twelve. Then my elder brother took over, but he had a problem since he could never collect as much revenue as the government wanted.”

“The British government?” I ask for clarification.

“Oh, yes, the British. By that time, around 1930, the *Diwans* were little more than officers to collect revenue for the British. My brother told them to take over the collecting themselves, which they agreed

to do for a period of three years. Then they told him, ‘We’ve collected as much as possible. If there is anything more, you can collect.’ But he declined the offer and told them, ‘No, you continue for three more years.’ He just hated being pressured by them to press the poor villagers for more.

“At that time, a dispute came up about the ownership of a couple of acres in the village of Chamrajnagar. The government told him that he had to furnish the deed to prove that property was his. Well, that piece of property had been in the family for over 150 years—no one knew where any official papers were. Probably, there never were any papers at all. Everyone knew whose property it was. Somehow, I never understood how, because I was studying in England, but, somehow, they connected the ownership of that property with ownership of the temple.”

“Yes, I knew that the British imposition of the concept of private ownership of land and their deeding system totally changed the relationship of the society of the villages. It happened in America too with the American Indians. Well, it even happened in Britain. When they developed plowing with a horse, the nobles ran the peasant tillers off the lands their ancestors had lived on for centuries. But that change happened in India back in the early 1800’s.”

“True, but they didn’t pay much attention to the outback villages until the 1900’s. It was the agricultural lands that gave a profit for taxation that they were concerned with. You see, in the beginning, there was the looting of the stores of riches of the many *rajas* and *nawabs* and the money made by the British merchants and traders. All these funds went into hands of individuals and did not contribute to the revenue needed to run the country, most of which they had conquered by the late 1800’s. So they had to organize their taxation system better for money to run the country. Their system meant a switch from the traditional goods and produce to coin for payment. These two factors—deeded private property and payment in money—totally destroyed the cultural base of India.”

“I see your point. But even today there are squatters on the steps of a friend’s mansion on Malabar Hill in Bombay, so maybe the Brits weren’t totally successful in their private property ultimatums.”

He chuckles at my observation, then continues, “The British left, but India can never return to what it was. I’m not saying there weren’t injustices under the old system, but you knew who was cheating you and who to go to for justice. Everyone was responsible to someone, and also responsible for someone. It was a give and take. The British claim they introduced the justice system in India. What a hoax, under their system, everyone was cheated by a monstrous government for whom no one took any responsibility.”

The bus stops in a small village and several Tibetans board the bus. I look at my companion with a question mark on my face. He informs me that there is a Tibetan settlement in the Nilgiris, on the next road over from B. R. Hills.

As the bus starts up again, he goes on with his personal story, “Since my brother could not produce a deed, the government took over that couple of acres, and they took the temple too. He was terribly upset that the Ranganathan Temple was taken over like any piece of real estate. He tried to fight it. But who could he appeal to?

“He was a devotee of Lord Ranganathan himself, but more than that he felt it was his personal responsibility to keep the temple sanctified. It was the only temple in the area for the villagers to come to petition the Lord Ranganathan for their needs. To lose the temple to the administration of foreigners was such a blow to him. Soon after, he became insane; so bad that he had to be institutionalized.”

I remain silent as he takes a moment to regain his composure. “I was called back here from England because of my brother’s illness, but there was nothing I could do. So after a short time, I returned to England to complete my studies.”

He lowered his voice almost to a whisper, “Really, his life had been taken from him; he no longer had a reason to live. He later died in that mental institution.”

I remain silent, what can I say… so many stories, so many hardships imposed on such kind-hearted people. Even though I have rationalized and explained why they have been able to endure through the centuries, still I can never really comprehend it myself. I am in a somber mood although I put a smile on my face to bid the gentleman good-bye at the bus station.

After a break for a cup of tea, I will just hop on the Bangalore bus. Although Mysore is a lovely town, I will not bother even to spend the night here since I have been here several times, even for their famous *Dussehra*, festival of lights, celebration. The ex-Maharaja still lives here in his spectacular palace built in the early 1900's. The most notable feature is the *darbar* (audience) hall, which is large enough to accommodate dignitaries arriving on elephants. In addition, there are several notable spots nearby. Tippu Sultan's capital and fort are only seven miles away in Seringapatam. The Keshava Temple, said to be the most exquisite temple in India, is 25 miles away in Somnathpur. I have not seen it yet, but I am happy to have something to come back for.

For the trip to Bangalore, I happen to be seated by a most congenial young man. He and a good friend have started a computer company in Bangalore, specializing in both hard and software. They are both *Brahmans*, who were unable to continue higher studies because of discrimination against the high castes. At the technical universities they wanted to attend, there were only three seats available to *Brahmans*. Those seats would be fought over viciously by those who have the most power and most money. Not having the resources for such a contest, they are manifesting a successful business without the degrees. I end up making a new friend and having a reliable place to borrow a computer to work on the magazine.

A few weeks later, I am invited to their office to celebrate *Dussehra*, which is celebrated throughout south India, a commemoration of Shakti. She is the feminine energy, from whom all material wealth flows. So all machines—computers, motorcycles, cars—are decorated with flowers and smeared with sandalwood paste with a dot of red *kumkuma*. Then there is the traditional feast of sweets. *Gulab jamans* (I call them *gulabis*) will ever remain my favorites. They are a small round doughnut made of mostly of condensed milk, deep fried, then soaked in sugar syrup with a hint of rosewater and saffron.

Now that I am on my own, I take the first opportunity just to sit and think. I really feel in the midst of uncertainty. It has not been easy to find my ideal ashram with serious meditation and study. Surely, I am living through my own personal experience of Rassalas, the Prince of Abssynia. It was always one of my favorite works in English, but I never intended to live out the scenario personally.

Now why did I come to India? I ask myself. First, because of curiosity; I will always want to peek behind the curtain of the unknown. Also, I am intrigued with the idea of having a totally different mindset, a different way of looking at the world. I have to think about these ideas and see where I am. Admittedly, I do experience a certain aliveness and freedom alone in the mountains. But in the city—I was not back in Bangalore thirty minutes when I was calling a auto-rickshaw driver a "bastard" (he doesn't know what I'm saying). He was trying to charge me double the meter price.

In the meantime, I always have work to do on the magazine, but soon I will have a treat. In a week, Swami Chinmayananda will arrive here for a ten-day lecture series. He is truly my spiritual *guru,* for he was the one who has most helped me in the attempt to "remove the darkness" of ignorance, which I would call simply "unconsciousness." I have no inclination to be dependent on him, and he would not allow it if I wanted. When I am not with him, I enjoy being free and independent. Nevertheless, every time I meet him, I am again overwhelmed with his being. He is incredibly radiant and joyful. That was what attracted me to him as a teacher, when I met him in California in 1976. While I watched him giving a lecture, I noted that he was just exuding joy; he truly was enjoying what he was doing. *That's what I want*was my conscious thought.

When Swamiji arrives, there are a couple of American women traveling with him. One appears to have become a bit attached to the Swami. She evidently does not know how ruthless he can sometimes be. He sometimes tells us, "Don't hang on to me. I'm not a mule *guru* carrying anybody on my back."Because of

the two women and one European man who has joined us, we become involved in a discussion of a subject that is not normally brought up in *satsang* with an Indian *guru*. We ask, “What is a *guru*?”

Through our studies, we know that the scriptures specifically note the qualifications of the *guru*: “one well-versed in the Vedas and well-established in the Truth.” The Swami emphasizes that the teacher must give equal importance to the intellectual teaching of philosophy, as well as a sensible practice appropriate to the student, whether it be meditation, teaching the scriptures, or serving in the community. Someone mentions that it is getting harder to find such a qualified teacher these days.

“Oh, you think so? Well, it is just as hard to find a good student!” the Swami counters with a hardy laugh. Then he continues, “So many people want to follow a *guru* blindly, like dumb cattle in a herd. They want to sit in the *guru’s* shadow and comprehend the light. It will never happen. Just like any other worthwhile endeavor, one has to employ intelligent evaluation when following the spiritual path.

“If you are waiting to be transformed by the touch of a *guru*, I’m afraid you will have to wait a long time. Self-redemption must ultimately come from within yourself. Any external props such as temples, *gurus*, books are only aids to help build-up your inner perfection.”

“But, Swamiji, in America, we have some real quacks for teachers.”

“One need not be so critical. Teachers are needed on every level. Can we say that the elementary school teacher is a quack because the graduate student no longer has any need for learning the alphabet? No, we need those who teach at the lower levels to bring the student’s understanding forward, so that they can move up to the higher levels.”

While we are on the subject, I formulate a question regarding my quandary about a *guru’s* moral behavior. “Swamiji, I know that in Hinduism good and bad, right and wrong are much more flexible than in the Western religions. However, I find myself questioning the behavior of some of the *gurus*, particularly those who have migrated to the U.S. and Canada, in regards to having sexual relationships with their women students.”

“You are correct; we cannot say that the behavior is wrong in itself because he is not actually breaking any rule or vow. However, the *guru’s* behavior must be morally perfect, since the students are bound to imitate the teacher to some extent. If he is immoral, then the students will copy his bad habits, thinking these things do not make any difference; yet they may make a difference for the student. So the student is misled and does not make any progress.”

I comment further, “I guess it is the secretiveness that bothers me. It just seems such a contradiction that someone who expounds Truth is sneaking around enjoying sensual pleasures. Why are they secretive? I think everyone should enjoy sensual pleasures any time they want if they have a consenting partner. I guess this is why it is such a quandary for me.”

“I’ve noticed they always seem to choose young, pretty women. It’s not like they are attempting to have a true relationship as we think of it, chimed in one of the American women.

“That’s right. If he decided that he wanted to have an open, equal relationship, no one would think twice about it,” I comment.

This prompts the Swami to add, “So this kind of talk is the kind of gossip that the behavior generates. That’s why the *guru* has to be above these things, or we will waste our time preoccupied with his escapades, instead of his teaching. It’s human nature.”

After a moment of silence, he mentions, “Actually, we will be covering the qualities of a person ‘established in Truth’ later in the week. In Chapter Two, Lord Krishna gives out the signs to look for.”

Of course, we cannot wait, so we pull out our copies of the *Bhagavad Gita*. I have already read the chapter plenty of times, so I have a general idea, but I have never thought about any specific issue.

The European man begins to read, “One of steady wisdom is one who gives up all desires of the mind and delights in his inner divinity; who is undisturbed in misery and free from desires even in the midst of pleasures; who is free of all attachment, fear and anger; one who shows no particular affection to any one person.”

“There we are; we have our answer,” I comment.

“Good this is just what I wanted. You are all investigating and thinking for yourselves. You don’t need me. I’m going to work on my correspondence,” the Swami gets up and goes to him room.

Even though it is still extremely hot elsewhere, Bangalore remains a tolerable 80 degrees because of its altitude of around 3,000 feet. Every morning I take off to walk to Lal Bagh, a wonderful botanical garden. Hyder Ali, the father of Tippu Sultan, created this 240-acre garden over 200 years ago. This accomplishment certainly puts him high in my esteem, although he spent most of his life as a warrior dedicated to conquering more territory. Bangalore was just a small village ruled by a local chieftain when Hyder Ali arrived and decided to make it his summer quarters. I am sure every other ruler, including the British, contributed new varieties to the garden. There are even selections from the tropical areas of Africa.

I stroll through all the shady paths before I sit down to bird watch in my two favorite spots: the lotus pond and the bamboo grove. One day I actually see one of the incredible white Paradise Flycatchers with the long tail streamers fluttering among the bamboo clumps. I have only seen them in the Himalayas before.

But nature is not always so gracious. One morning I hear some crows making a big racket. When I approach, I see a small helpless baby owl hovering on a branch that is being tormented by the aggressive big birds. He is low enough that I could reach him, but I know that he will never allow me touch him, even to protect him. Although he is a baby, his beak and claws have developed noticeably. Knowing that I would have to have some type of equipment to make a rescue, I go over to the green house to try to find an attendant. I end up making a round of the entire garden, looking for someone, but to no avail. I feel so helpless. I finally have to give up and head for the library, leaving the little owl to its fate.

I usually have about an hour to stroll around the gardens, then I head for the library, which opens at 10:00 a.m. I spend most of the day collecting material. I have to copy it by hand into my notebook, since there are no copy machines for my articles in the magazine. Just as I am about to finish the up-coming issue, I get a nice surprise when Nagamani phones me at Hari’s, where I am staying.

She is in Bangalore visiting her family, so they invite me to their home for lunch. I get to meet her sweet, dear mother, and her brother, Varadha, and sister, Radharamani, but not her father. He is a retired professor and lives with a student in Mysore where he continues with his teaching of private students. Nagamani’s younger sister, a Sanskrit scholar and an enterprising woman, is a manager of a state bank. With this job, she supports the household. Of course, since the father is retired, he has no income.

Her mother tells me an unusual story of how Nagamani, meaning Lord *(mani)* of the serpents *(naga),* got her unusual name. Her great grandfather (father’s side) lived in a village 30 km. from Mysore. One day a cobra appeared on the path where everyone passed each day. Strangely, it was just lying there and did not move for several days. It was a bother for the villagers to go around it, plus there was concern for the safety of the children. Nagamani’s great grandfather took charge and grabbed the serpent by the back of the neck and took it to a spot away from the traveled path. While doing so, he noticed that cobra’s tongue had a thorn in it, which he promptly removed. Then he put the cobra down and told it to go in peace.

Instead of leaving, the cobra turned back and circled the rescuer three times as a sign of respect. (It goes without saying that they were clockwise circles.) Then the snake raised its hood and bowed three times. The man was intuitive, so he understood the serpent to be saying: “We shall be friends and I will protect

your family from harm from serpents for seven generations. Further, you are to name the firstborn of each generation 'Naga' (snake) after me. I will come and visit the home at the time of every birth." They followed the instructions; so, true to its promise, a cobra was spotted at Nagamani's birth.

The family is planning to take a tour of some of the pilgrimage spots in south India and have asked me to come along. I am quite eager for this opportunity because they know many unique places that I would never find out about. My only hesitation is that Varadha, who will be driving the car, is a bit reckless behind the wheel.

He also tells me an interesting story. Remember the *Nadi Shastri* who gave Vani and me palm-leaf readings? As it turns out, Varadha used to work for him. Soon after I was there, the *shastri* left on his trip to U. S. as planned. As he was returning to India, an American astrologer told him that he had a bad conjunction coming up. He advised Ramakrishnan to exercise caution as sometimes it meant death. "You don't know diamond from glass," Ramakrishnan chided the astrologer. "I have a lot of work yet to do. I am destined to be very famous." As fate would have it, Ramakrishnan died of a heart attack a week after returning to India.

Unfortunately, the Radharamani is not able to get off work as she planned, so the trip is canceled. I am disappointed, but Varadha tells me of an "enlightened" sage in Kumbakonam by the name of Swami Rama. However, I decide to take a mental break first. I set out on a tour of several of major pilgrimage spots on my own. I have not been inclined to be just a tourist, but for the next six weeks that's what I am going to do.

Chapter Twenty-two

Touring South Indian Temples

I love south India because it embodies ancient India. Yes, it’s big, hot, dry and dusty, and, often quite rustic; yet some of these towns date back before the Common Era. Unlike the North, the South has not suffered the major ravages by the world’s greatest conquerors, for the Vindya Mountain Range and Narmada River formed a barrier that protected the region. The Muslims and British were the only ones who managed to penetrate here. Fortunately, the Muslim conquerors arrived here late in their Empire era. By then they had lost their enthusiasm for destroying temples (although there are exceptions, including Hampi). Consequently, we find many awesome Indian temples still in a decent state of preservation in the South.

Notice that I said Indian, not Hindu, for south India is the repository of Dravidian culture. Over the centuries, the culture has developed in five distinct areas, each with its own language, writing script, dress and social customs. These regions are the four states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, although they were lumped together as Madras under the British Raj. At the present time, the archaeologists and scholars are hotly debating the Dravidian origins. There are two prevalent theories, one that the native people migrated here when the Aryans overran the Indu Valley civilization. The other is that Tamil Nadu is the north section of a much larger continent that existed long before the Aryans arrived; the southern part now lies under the Indian Ocean. In either case, Dravidian roots date back several thousand years before the Common Era. Regardless of the origins, one thing is certain, the Dravidians had their own unique culture: scriptures, scholars, deities, temples, priests and holy sages.

By the time histories were being written of the area, the Aryan Hindus and native Dravidians had mixed and matched in an immitatable manner. For example, in the great temple building period from 600 to 1600 AD, most of the large Hindu temples were build in the Dravidian style, or in some cases were built around earlier Dravidian structures. The indigenous rituals and deities remained the same, except they were awarded an additional Sanskrit appellation. Actually, the name Shiva, the Dravidian deity, gradually replaced Rudra of the Aryans as the most common masculine deity. The common theory is that the Aryan invaders gradually moved south, absorbing the native cultures, both Dravidian and a variety of other clans. Again this assumption is being so hotly debated among the scholars that to even venture an opinion is to invite certain censure. The main object of the Indian scholars is to prove that Hinduism had no outside influence from foreign Aryans, who have been credited with writing at least a portion of the Vedas. Actually, the word *"arya"* is a Sanskrit word meaning "noble."

Taking pilgrimages to holy places is the great national pastime in Bharata, and it appears to have been so for centuries. The two major temple groups, definitely worth viewing for their wonderful architecture, are in Orissa and Karnataka. Three towns in Orissa, on the east coast, comprise one group. Bhuvaneswara was adorned with over 1,000 temples at its peak; you can still find over 500 fine examples that date from the 7th to the 11th century. Puri, with its awesome Jagannath, an ancient complex that supported 5,000 priests and staff, is said to be one of the monasteries where Christ studied during his "lost years." However, the temple was not built until the 12th century and is not accessible to foreigners. Like Puri, Konark, the site of the famous Sun Temple, is by the sea. This temple is second only to Khajuraho for its erotic art, as well as other fine carvings. Khajuraho is a favorite of foreigners for its lavish and explicit erotic art, as well as its dance festival in early March.

Traveling southwest to Karnataka, the temples at Belur and Halebid that date from 500 to 1300 AD are

outstanding examples of stone sculpture at its most inspired. Nearby in Sravanabelagola, you will find Jain temples and monasteries, including the monolithic 50-foot "sky-clad" statue of a Jain saint. The remainder of the group from the Chalukaya and Hoysala Dynasties are farther north in Badami and nearby villages. While in that area, you can also visit Bijapur to view fine examples of Islam architecture, including a mausoleum second only to the Taj Mahal.

Since I have already seen most of these temples, I am going to limit my travels to Tamil Nadu, visiting the two eminent temple towns of Kanchipuram and Madurai. In general, although there are volumes of the chronicles of the gods and their incarnations, the Indians were not inclined to write mundane history. However, because the Tamilians traded with the Greeks and Romans, we do have some scraps of history of Tamil Nadu for the past 2,000 years. Throughout the centuries, a series of family dynasties ruled in a feudal-type system. Although the kings fought among themselves for power over land and populace, they also seemed to have contested among themselves as to who could build the greatest monuments to the deities.

The early dynasty of the Pallavas (500-900 AD) chose a tiny town near the east coast for the capital of their empire that endured for over four centuries. By the 7th century, Kanchipuram had developed into a major cultural center attracting artists, dancers, musicians, scholars and weavers of the famous Kanchi silk. The kings and wealthy merchants were grateful to the deities for their prosperity and built some 1,000 temples to venerate them. Many of the temples are worth seeing, for they are some of the oldest in India.

Kanchi, along with the temples of Orissa, were the principal centers of the *devadasi* phenomenon. The main temple had some 100 “servants of the deities” who attended the icon with fanning, dressing and honoring with lights. They also sang and danced for the deities’ amusement. Just like the priesthood, the occupation was caste-bound, so the access to the gods was inherited from generation to generation. Undoubtedly, the caste had its heavenly beginnings.

Urvashi, a heavenly courtesan in Lord Indra’s court, became infatuated with his handsome son, causing her to miss a step during a performance. Thereby the couple was banished from heaven to live on earth. Their offspring generated the *devadasi* community. In the mid-nineteenth century, one anthropologist wrote that at that time the *devadasis* were the only Hindu women who could read and write. Depending on the wealth of the patron kings, many of the women were endowed with large estates. In addition, devotees paid their respects to them, for they were considered living embodiments of Urvasi, the courtesan to the gods.

No doubt as the cultural milieu changed to foreign administrations these women fell on hard times to be exploited by the rich and powerful, so the tradition gradually declined. When the Indian government took over the Jagannath temple in Puri in 1955, a group of *devadasis* who were still performing there lost the last of their patronage. Many petitioned the government for a pension, but to no avail. The prevalent reports that many of them practiced what we label prostitution seems to be correct from what little information I can gather. However, there appears that there were no negative connotations in this society where anything goes. After all, they were consorts of the gods. Anyway, the Hindu sees everyone as god. . . so the *devadasis* served god in human form also. There are advantages to having an all-encompassing mind—and it’s not puritanism.

When the Pallava Dynasty fell in the 9th century, Kanchi and its temples were left to languish without benefactors. Today, it is a very Indian town; however, the nearby town of Mahaballipuram, which served as a port since the first century, also has some excellent examples of the Kanchi era.

I head farther south for my next stop in Tanjavore [Tanjore], the capital of the Chola Dynasty, which ruled south India for three centuries (900-1300 AD). During that time, Tanjavore was the political, literary and religious center of the South. The principal temple holds a 206-foot Shiva *lingam* made from a single 80-ton slab of granite. Foreigners are not allowed in the inner temple, but can observe the fine examples of Chola architecture in the entrance towers and pavilions.
The museums in the old palace of the Cholas make the trip to Tanjavore unique. The palace itself would

hardly be worth the time, for it is in a bad state of disrepair. However, it holds some fine examples of the Tanjavore bronze sculptures, particularly of Nataraja, although you can also see fine examples in the Madras Government Museum. Nataraja, who is Shiva as the cosmic dancer, is only found in Tamil Nadu, suggesting an influence from the ecstatic priests here. Or maybe they became ecstatic in order to imitate him.

For me, the real wonder here is an old library, with over 35,000 volumes, all in Sanskrit or Indian languages. They were collected by the Nayak and Maratha kings from 1600 to 1900 AD. The majority are handwritten; many are illustrated with delicate ink and watercolor drawings. Fortunately, a few are on display, so I can get a suggestion of the treasures this library holds.
The Cholas built exquisite temples in this region. Later while in Kumbakonam, I find the best examples to explore, for, like the temples in Hampi, they are no longer used for worship. The Dharasuram temple is only 4 km. from Kumbakonam, so it is easily accessible by auto rickshaw. On the road between Vadalur and Kumbakonam is the real gem—GangaKondamCholaPuram. (That must be the record! These long words are usually compounds, so they break down into something manageable: Ganga-Water-Chola-Place). The huge tank was used to empty vessels of water from the Ganga brought to the Chola court by their vassal kings.

Still heading south, I reach Madurai, the example par excellence of Tamil Nadu's Dravidian temples. In my opinion, if you only have time for one temple, it should be Madurai, the temple dedicated to the Goddess Meenakshi. During the period from 600-1300 AD, Madurai, capital of the Pandya Dynasty was the true center of Dravidian culture, having supported three distinct literary *sangams,* academies. All the scholars and poets would gather for a convention to confer and exchange ideas. Of course, they were only concerned with spiritual matters, as were all scholarly works and creative endeavors. If any scholar had a treatise or a sage had an inspired poem, it had to be submitted to the test of merit. The method of judging was to throw the palm leaf tablets into the temple tank. Those that sank were considered worthless; those that floated were considered worthy compositions.

Along with their religious and literary patronage, the Pandya kings did not neglect worldly wealth. They were known to have traded with the Greeks and Romans, via the Arabian Sea. Madurai flourished under several dynasties until the early 1300's when the Muslim rulers penetrated the barriers of the Vindyas and Nilgiris to loot the prosperous towns in the South, including Madurai. Soon afterwards, Madurai was incorporated into the Delhi Sultanate.

Although the temple was built in modern times, its origins claim ancient connections to the deities. Even the history of Madurai has a mythological beginning. Once Lord Indra, the King of the heavenly hosts, had to do penance for the sin of killing a *Brahman* in an accident. While traveling in a forest near the Vaigai River, he suddenly felt a purifying energy field. Upon investigation, he discovered a natural "self-born" *lingam,* a symbol for Shiva, under a Kadamba tree. He bathed in a near-by pond, then worshipped the deity with golden lotus flowers. Thus, he was released to return to his heavenly abode, but not before he erected a small chapel over the holy spot.

Sometime in the 7th century, a merchant passed that way and happened upon the old chapel. He reported the unusual phenomena to the ruling Pandya king. At the first opportunity, the king traveled to the place to worship, for the kings relished all the deity power they would muster. Evidently, Shiva was pleased with the worship and offerings because he let nectar fall from his flowing locks onto the devotee. The king promptly decided to build a suitable temple and to establish his capital in this place. But the old chapel was an abode of Shiva, how did Meenakshi succeed in replacing him as the principal deity of the temple?

The next generation of the Pandya Dynasty had not been blessed with an heir to the throne. For the purpose of having a child, the royal couple performed an elaborate ritual, according to the Vedic instructions. You can imagine their surprise when a three-year-old girl emerged from the sacrificial fire. They had their heir, who they named Meenakshi—an incarnation of Devi, the female power. However, there was one slight abnormality: Their divine daughter had three breasts. At the moment of this discovery, a voice was heard, telling the parents that the extra breast would disappear when the child

met her husband.

Since the princess was destined to rule a large empire, her education included all the skills of warfare. Eventually she became a very successful warrior, conquering many neighboring territories. Triumphant, she pushed forward until she reached Mt. Kailasa, the abode of Lord Shiva. On the battlefield when her eyes met those of Shiva, her third breast disappeared; therefore, she knew that he was to be her husband. After they were wed, they moved to Madurai where they ruled for some time. Their marriage is still celebrated in late April with a ceremony in the temple, followed by a procession of the divine couple around the town. After successfully producing a competent heir, an incarnation of their divine son, Subramanya, they were free to return to their heavenly abode.

It was several centuries later, approximately in the 12th century, that the shrine commemorating Meenakshi was built, supposedly by her own son. The custom remains that one first worships Meenakshi, then her consort, Shiva. By the way, to make it easy, I have used their Sanskrit names, but they also have Dravidian names: Thadathagai (Meenakshi) and Sundareshwara (Shiva) and their son, Muruga.

The Vedas do not mention the deities who are worshipped in the temples today, but speak in an abstract manner of the Infinite playing through various powers: fire, wind, water. Later Sri Veda Vyasa personified these abstractions into the deities portrayed in the Puranas, the Hindu epics. Then in one of those strange quirks of history, Buddhist monks visiting Greece in the early years of the Common Era saw the great sculptures there and brought back the idea of making sculpted images of the Buddha. At that time, Buddhism flourished in India, so statues of Buddha had been installed in places of Buddhist worship. Later, the Hindus began to copy the idea and build permanent shrines for their own deities, instead of continuing to use the open-air venue of the Vedic rituals.

Legend continued to grow around the various deities as their devotees had unique experiences in direct encounters with them. It would be more accurate to say the thought energy of the worshippers reinforced the power of the gods. Hindu temples are alchemical laboratories to turn thought into matter, the objects needed for success in the material world.

While the modern Western physicists are working on measuring energy fields, the Hindus have been consciously creating energy fields for centuries. But not creating energy itself, the energy they focus into these spheres is the energy in and through all creation. So if a group of persons, such as priests get together, they can maintain the energy by using certain *mantras* that even make the energy field expand and become stronger. Then the energy field can be invoked for human use.

The foundation of the energy field is a set procedure. All of the great temples were built on a *samadhi* of a great sage to preserve and take advantage of the purified vibration created through his austerities. I understand that this custom was also practiced in Catholic Europe, at least through the Middle Ages.

Over the *samadhi* is placed a *yantra*, or a geometric diagram, that represents the deity of the temple. It is capable of focusing the energy field created by the sage. Then the stone idol, or transmitter, is placed above the *yantra*. Afterwards, a living saint installs the image with an "enlivening" ceremony. Then the idol is ready to radiate the energy in a concentrated dose to the worshippers, according to the worshipers capacity to receive.

The energy field will dissipate if it is not regularly energized with offerings, that is, the chanting of the *mantras*, holy incantations, by the priests. The offerings of people are for the priests whose duty it is to sustain the energy field. In addition, it is their duty to assure that there are no disturbances in the energy field. That’s why foreigners and untouchables—who could not possibly have the right mental attitudes—are not allowed in most of the heavy-duty temples. One temple guard told me, with a club in hand, that they did not want scoffers in the temple. I doubt even he understood the importance of his job. Then too, the looting of the riches of the temples by barbarians continued through the 1900’s, so that habit would not invite hospitality.

The possibility of dissipation of the energy fields is not my conjecture, it is verified by an interesting historical fact. Realizing that the populace were not ready for the philosophy of the incomprehensible *Brahman*, Adi Sankarcharya, the great philosopher of Hindu thought, did as much to renew temple worship, as he did to debate the nihilist Buddhist philosophers to bring them into the Hindu fold. When he traveled around Bharata in the 7th century, he found that many of the Hindu places of worship had fallen into disuse; therefore, he re-enlivened the idols by invoking the deity to return and reside in the stone image or *lingam*. Then the deity had to be "fed" and kept alive by the *mantras* of the Vedas. So it seems likely that if the Ark of the Covenant were discovered today, it would no longer have the power to destroy anyone who looked upon it.

Several American authors have described Hinduism as a renunciate religion. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Good lord, even the gods are married! The temples here were built specifically for getting and begetting. The scriptures ascribe four stages of life: 1) *brahmacharya,* student, 2) *grahastha*, householder, 3) *vanaprastha,* withdrawal for contemplation to the forest, 4) *sannyasa,* renunciation. So renunciation is the fourth stage of life, coming after one has studied, then had a good life of *artha, kama* and *dharma:* wealth, passion and duty. *Kama* definitely includes sex. The *Brahadranyaka Upanishad* gives explicit instructions on pleasing a woman; the *Kama Sutra* was written by a sage for the purpose of assisting the populace in experiencing "en total" their sexual nature.

In other words, after a person has experienced all that life has to offer, he can then let it go by renouncing—otherwise, there would be nothing to abandon. True, there are exceptions; a few young people decide to dedicate their lives to spiritual pursuits early in life. On these rare occasions, the parents are often adamantly against such an action. Even Adi Sankaracharya, who renounced the world at the age of eight, had to trick his mother into thinking he was dying before she would give her permission for his taking of the renunciation vows.

There is no judgment that the experience of one stage of life is better than another; all four contribute to an experience of wholeness. For example, the daily rituals that the householder performs have the subsidiary effect of focusing the mind to develop the power of concentration. This training is useful later in life, for a concentrated mind aids in spiritual goals.

So the success is insured with the power of positive thinking with an extra boost from an energy field of the deity. Whether you call it positive thinking, mind control, or devotion, the petitioners do have to tune their minds to the right station. The station is broadcasting Chopin, but the radio must be tuned to that frequency to hear the music. The Indians must be doing something right. Let's face it, most of India is a desert, yet it is supporting one billion human bodies—and uncountable billions of creeping and crawling and buzzing things.

Not all worshipers come to the deity to get material things. The peak experience is to have *darshan,* the vision, of the deity. Once the connection is made, the deities can bestow any type of boon the seeker desires. For example, the recent Acharya of the Sringeri *Matha*, monastery, told me that he had received enlightenment through the intercession of the Goddess Lalita, the deity of the monastery. Of course, he was a very advanced and pure soul in every respect, and I assume he had done reams and reams of the *mantras* for invoking her grace.

I shall always remember my short visit to Sringeri in 1978. I truly admired the Acharya and I feel that he was an influence on my returning to India. I am sure that observing his way of life was a prime factor in my desire to settle in one place with a good teacher for meditation and study. Had he been alive, I would have spent the majority of time with him in Sringeri. However, fate gives us strange challenges. Just prior to this trip, I received the news that the Acharya had died of a heart attack.

Since I arrived in Madurai early in the morning, I am considering just visiting the temple and leaving that evening. But I encounter the strangest situation, one I have never confronted before in all of my travels. There was only one rest room open in the train station—the men's. I am in the South where in many households men and women even eat segregated! I do find a ladies' restroom, but it is padlocked. Obviously, I have to bathe and change clothes to go to the temple. Even if I wanted to shower in the

man's restroom, it would be impossible to dress in the tiny stalls. The women always shower, throw on their petticoats, then exit to the waiting room to wrap their *saris,* or the 8-yards of cloth would get wet from the shower floor.

So I take off to find the station manager. He tells me that there is a platform officer who has the key; he may open the ladies' restroom later. So off I go to find the platform manager, but his door is closed and I see through the crack that the light is out. While I am wondering what to do next, the flock of little white-haired ladies in starched cotton saris, who are following me up and down the train platform, is increasing in number. They are in the same plight and are cheering on my efforts in their quiet way. After almost an hour, I return to the platform manager's office to leave a note on his desk. Lo and behold, he was asleep in his office all the time—that's why the light was out. So after a refreshing bath in the ladies' restroom, I check my suitcase and walk over to the nearby temple.

The high walls of the Meenakshi Temple envelop fifteen acres of elaborately carved pavilions, chapels, a huge bathing tank (where they used to test manuscripts) and even an art gallery. The elegant and elaborate carvings include scenes from the epics, hundreds of heavenly deities—voluptuous and robust—as well as many renditions of historical scholars and even the rulers who built, or added onto, this temple.

The temple is a holy maze; the separate chapels and decorated hallways are so plentiful that is no space left for the open-air patios I have seen in other temples. The four *gopurams,* entrance towers, typical of Dravidian style, are intended to protect the sacred site from intrusions, physical or mental. Each tower was built by various rulers in a different century from 1250 to 1650 AD.

Foreigners are not allowed in the principal shrines of Shiva or Meenakshi. In many cases I have find that the rules are flexible, if one approaches the temple manager with the correct attitude and in the traditional dress of white *dhoti,* with bare chest, for the men, and *saris* for the women. To partake of the *puja,* worship service, a small fee is charged, so one can easily reach the proper authority through the priests who are selling the tickets. For a big *puja,* normally done only by Indians, the prices are quite high, up to 1,000 *rupees.*

I end up deciding to stay a couple of days so that I can spend more time soaking in the vibes of this place that breathes tradition and sanctity. To me, it's as if the temple is an old medieval town within itself. Exploring its passageways, I truly feel in another time and space. I feel connected to a beautiful past, envisioned and created by architects and stone-carvers, yet sanctified by the devotion and faith of thousands of worshipers who have passed here through the centuries.

Chapter Twenty-three

Exploring the Coromandal Coast

My next stop, KanyaKumari, is at the tip of the Indian continent. At this one beach, you can see watch the sun rise from the Bay of Bengal, ride over the Indian Sea, then set over the Arabian Sea. The Hindus believe that one dip in this convergence of three seas can cleanse all *mala*, dirt, that covers one's divinity. Historically, this is the place where in 1892 Swami Vivekananda sat out on a rock island in the sea, meditated, then vowed that Indians would be freed from foreign rule.

Some Indian historians credit him with the start of India's independence movement. Now large boats ferry people back and forth to the rock, where one can visit the Vivekananda Memorial.
The Goddess KanniyaKumari resides in a small temple on the shore of the starting place of the Coromandal Coast that runs up the east coast. An incarnation of Shakti (the Goddess in her power mode), she wears a beautiful diamond nose ring. Legend has it that at one time the temple door opened toward the sea, but if KanniyaKumari eyed a ship, it was doomed to a watery grave. The locals say this included a British frigate that was carrying away her original diamond nose ring, stolen from her nose. Thereafter, the entrance to the sea was sealed shut forever.

Since there is not much else going on here, I go by the tourist office to see if there are any excursions to nearby scenic or historical places. A couple of unenthusiastic young men inform me of a tour that sounds worthwhile, so I sign up for the next day. The tour includes a summer palace of a Kerala *raja,* now in Tamil Nadu instead of Kerala (placing boundaries of states according to language groups caused these discrepancies along the border), plus a temple and an old British fort. From a display of brochures, I pick one up about a park where one can see tigers. I ask one of the young men if he thinks it is possible to see tigers there.

"No, you won't see any tigers there."

"Then this brochure is misleading."

"You can try it, but I was there for six months. My degree is in forest management, so that's where I was assigned for my work program. We mainly just dug ditches. I never saw one tiger in six months."

We talk a few more minutes, then I ask the right question. The graduate begins to tell me his "sad story" in regard to finding work. After graduation from a university, he was unable to find a position in the forest department. He took a stopgap job in a restaurant in Madras at slave wages while continuing to look for a better position. Someone suggested that he apply for a job as a policeman. Because of his unusual height for a Tamilian, over six feet, the police officials were interested in him. They even intimated that they would consider him for a position as an Inspector, one of the top dogs. The only thing was he had to pay a 100,000 *rupees baksheesh* to the Tamil government. They even arranged for him to meet the Chief Minister personally. A movie idol, M.G. Ramachandran (called simply M.G.R.), had ruled Tamil Nadu's politics for years with his Dravidian Progressive Federation (DMK).

"Well, that's impressive. You even met M.G.R. himself. When I was in Madras, I even saw small shrines in his honor."

"Oh, yes. They sure impressed me."

"But you didn't have the *rupees*?"

"Actually, I could only come up with 80,000 *rupees*, so they told me that was okay. However, to get that kind of money, we had to sell my family's business. We had one of the souvenir shops here. It was my inheritance; it was everything my family had."

"And your parents agreed?"

"Oh, yes. This was an important job with plenty of pay. It was a quite an opportunity for me."

"So you paid the money?"

"Yes, I did pay it. Then the first thing I know M.G.R. is on his way to U.S. to have some surgery. The next thing I know, his government has fallen and no one knows me."

"You paid 80,000 *rupees*—your family's entire fortune for that job—and suddenly no one knows you?"

"Exactly. So that is my sad story."

"Do you suppose it was your 80,000 *rupees* that helped pay for M.G.R.'s trip to U.S.? Maybe you deserve some credit—even though he died anyway, you did what you could," I attempt to tease him out of his gloom.

"Well, this is what we Indians get for electing movie stars for politicians. This sort of thing couldn't happen anywhere else."

"Hummm..." I clear my throat, sigh, and roll my eyes. "I'm not really so sure about that."

I spend the rest of the day walking along the beach. On my return, I am attracted to some stalls with lovely shells at a very low price. *You are not going to tote sea shells around,* I command myself in order to resist the fine specimens.

Although the water looks tempting, and it's warm enough in November, I have declined going swimming. First I do not have a swimming suit with me, and I am not inclined to enter the sea fully dressed, like the Indian women do. In addition, this area is known to have dangerous currents, as does most of Coromandal Coast. While I was in Pondy, one ashram student was lost to Varuna, the god of the sea.

The most compelling proof is a report of a friend when she traveled here in 1975. At that time there was an American here who lived like a native *sadhu*. He moved from one holy place to the other, getting by the best he could. One could say he was enjoying the experience of life beyond materialism. When he found out that his brother in New York City was to be married, he begged the brother to come to experience the phenomena of India before his marriage. The *sadhu* reasoned that with wife, kids, house payment, car payment, the brother would never be free to make the trip. His brother agreed and joined the *sadhu* on a tour of some of the standard pilgrimage spots, including KanyaKumari. Naturally, the brother went into the sea for a swim; although probably not for religious reasons. His *sadhu* brother was with him, but had turned his head away only momentarily. When he looked back, his brother had disappeared—never to be seen again.

Until her passing away a few years ago, an Indian female *sadhu* lived on the beach here with a pack of dogs. She could always get free food from any local restaurant, as the owners always said they collected twice the receipts on the days that she dined with them. Hari had met her and said it was difficult to discern whether she was a saint, or a simpleton. In any event, all the pilgrims, and restaurant owners, considered her a saint.

Now I turn back north, traveling up the east coast, to Rameshwaram, another holy site on the Bay of

Bengal. If you are traveling by car at a leisurely pace, you can take a break en route at Tiruchendur, a Muruga/Subramanya temple—a very Indian phenomenon. The temple at Rameshwaram, built on a sandy island, dates back to the *Ramayana,* the epic that chronicles the battle of the great king Rama. Rama had to come from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka to rescue his virtuous wife, Sita, who had been kidnapped by the demon-king Ravana. After the battle, Rama is believed to have come here to offer worship to Lord Siva to expiate the sin of killing Ravana. Although the epic predates history, the RamanathaSwami temple was not completed until 1700 AD, supposedly having taken 350 years to construct it. Seven-hundred-foot corridors, lined with hundreds of beautifully of carved pillars, surround the inner sanctum. The sight is impressive, but since the pillars are all alike; it is not as spectacular as other temples I have visited.

The main feature here is the purification by bathing in the holy waters. I find a guide who speaks decent English and pay him 50 Rps. for the tour. This is not an architectural tour like in Madurai, this is a tour to the famous *tirthas,* or holy waters. Again, all *mala,* dirt, will be removed from one who drinks from all of these *tirthas*. Since I was expecting some gardens with lovely, natural ponds, I am surprised, for all of the *tirthas* are wells, that is, cement-cast rectangular tanks.

As I follow my guide around, he draws a bucket of water from each one, then he pours some in my cupped palms for me to drink. The remainder, he pours over me for a holy bath. Halfway through, I am so drenched that he takes pity and only draws half of bucket of water. One tank is clearly posted, "Do Not Drink," in several languages, even English. "The water's not good," the guide tells me with a shake of the head. So I only take the bucket splashing at this one. I suppose this means that one streak of dirt remains—just enough to keep me human. However, I bet I am the only one who did not drink the water here today. The Hindus know that holy water cannot be polluted; they will drink it without ill effect. So in a dripping, but cleansed state, I approach the deity to receive a blessing.

After the temple tour in the morning, I eat lunch and opt for a short rest. As soon as the shadows begin to lengthen, I take off for a walk along the beach road. After a short distance, I am joined by a group of cheerful, young girls, about 10 to 12 years old, on their way home from school. They ask me the usual questions. As we walk along, one by one, they leave to disappear down lanes to thatched huts.

One bright-eyed girl takes particular interest in me. "Please come home with me," she begs.

I really have not gotten my walk out, but she is very insistent. In the end, I am sufficiently curious to find out more about Amali and her family, so I agree. She flies down a sandy lane in front of me to a gate of a wooden picket fence. We enter it, then enter another gate that leads to the house. The first thing I notice on the wall is a picture of the Virgin Mary, so I make certain assumptions. The mother, named Mary, is at home; she cheerfully greets me as if she expects Amali to drag home a white face every day.

After introductions, Amali takes me on a tour down to the beach, where she shows me where they used to live, a one-roomed hut. Now their house has three rooms, a separate kitchen attached, and a pleasant courtyard with a few flowering plants.

On our way back from the beach, we encounter Mary, fetching water from a small well. Amali explains that she prefers to use this small well, although she has to use a rope and bucket to draw the water, because the large well with the pump always has long lines this time of the day.
We wait for Mary to walk back to the house, then follow her to the kitchen. An open room on the garden side, it forms an L with the main house, but there is no doorway between it and rest of the house. Mary has insisted that I have dinner with them. I watch as she begins to stoke the wood fire to cook the meal.

Soon we are joined by Amali's older sisters, both school teachers, who speak decent English. They tell me that Mary would love to come to America to make money. I ask if she knows that there are many people in America who do not make a lot of money. But Mary is definitely not convinced. She is sure she will strike it rich if she ever gets there. While we are talking she is preparing boiled fish and a tomato sauce. The young women help with chopping the tomatoes and vegetables for the sauce, but only Mary tends the simmering pots. Of course, I am not allowed to do anything. It's a not matter of *jati,* caste; I am a guest. I wonder if a fisherman is higher or lower than a foreigner who has crossed the dark waters? Even

in the fisherman *jati,* there are visible hierarchies. In this case, the head of this household is doing well for himself; he now owns his own boat. This new home with an extra-large outer yard is proof of his status in his own group.

The fish, a white firm-fleshed variety, is now cooked. Mary removes the fish from the pot and carefully removes all the skin and bones. *The fish is ready for the sauce,* I think, as she pours the red sauce over the white heap. As usual, I thought too fast, there is another step. Mary begins to squish the fish and the sauce together with her bare hands. Soon it is pressed into a croquette type ball. *Ah, fish croquettes, she will now fry them,* I think. No, they are ready to eat as is.
By this time, Amali's father has arrived home, but he does not enter the kitchen. He sits in a chair in the patio area to eat his dinner. We women sit on the kitchen floor for our dinner of tasty fish balls and fluffy steamed white rice. By the time we finish, it is quite dark, so I bid the kind family good-bye and wish them well.

The next day I explore the extensive beaches where I observe several varieties of crying sea birds. In the evening I look for a special shop because Rameshwaram is known as the place to buy crystal Siva lingams. I want to purchase one for the altar of a friend in Vermont. Directed to a certain store, I enter behind a dark curtain, where I sit on the floor in a circle around a short table with the male members of the family. Not wanting to misrepresent my intentions, I explain to them I can only afford a very small crystal.

Never mind, I still get the royal treatment. Tea is served before I can consider any possibilities. Of course, the men question me about my travels. After our tea is finished, a selection of small crystals is brought out on a dark purple cloth. The merchants display such concern that you would have thought that I was purchasing a diamond. They help me pick out a nice one that is totally flawless.

Although I arrived by train, I decide to take the bus since I will be heading to a town on the beach north of here. Thinking that the route passes along the coast, I am planning for an onslaught of scenery, sea birds and sea breezes. However, I had not counted on the highway cutting inland, so the terrain is pretty barren.

I reach Vailankanni by midday. Since the early monsoon clouds have disappeared, it's a very hot day, so I quickly find a room. After a bucket and mug bath, I rest until the worst of the heat is over. By late afternoon a breeze is wafting in from the sea, so I wend my way up a tree-lined walkway to the cathedral of the Holy Mother.

The tradition of a beautiful Lady of Health began here in Vailankanni in the 16th century. A young shepherd boy was carrying a gift of a pot of milk to his teacher. Suddenly, an unusual sleepiness overpowered him and he fell down in a swoon by a Banyan tree near a pond. He then saw a vision of a beautiful lady, holding a charming baby in her arms. Haloes of divine light encircled their heads. The divine lady then asked the boy for some milk for her child. Entranced by the vision, the shepherd boy offered the milk with reverence and respect.

At first the teacher did not believe the boy's story. However, when the half-empty milk pot began to fill, and even overflow, he returned with the boy to mark the place of the vision. This spot became known as "Our Lady's Tank," and developed into a pilgrimage place.

Some years later, at the end of the 16th century, there was another appearance of the Holy Mother. A poor lame boy was sitting under a spreading Banyan tree to sell buttermilk to support himself and his widowed mother. Again, the Holy Mother appeared and asked for milk for her baby. After the baby drank the buttermilk, she instructed the lame boy to go to a nearby town to a certain rich gentleman, who is said to have been Christian, and ask him to build a chapel for her. When the lame boy tried to get up, he found that his legs were healed. He hurried to the near-by town to tell the gentleman, who had just had a dream of the Holy Mother just the night before. So a small chapel with thatched roof was erected with a statue of the Holy Mother and the Divine Child. Because of the healing of the boy, the chapel became a major pilgrimage destination for the sick and lame.

In the mid-seventh century, a Portuguese merchant ship en route to China (remember, the Pope had given Portugal the eastern half of the world) was blown off course in a storm. The frightened sailors fell on their knees to entreat the Holy Mother to save them. They promised Mother Mary that they would build a chapel in her honor wherever she delivered them to safety. They reported that there was an immediate lull in the storm, enabling them to get to reach shore at—you guessed it—Vailankanni. One can imagine their surprise when they arrived at a chapel in that very town with a statue of the Holy Mother, which they immediately knew to be Mary. This miracle occurred on September 8th, the Feast of the Nativity.

Today's Indian Christians are sure that the early miracles of the Virgin Mary were performed for Catholics only. I think there is a possibility that history has been touched up a bit because Hindus have always been flexible about accepting miracles from saints of any religion. However, it is possible that there were Christians here since St. Thomas did travel to India to establish Christianity after the Ascension. A memorial to him, supposedly martyred (again possibly a Christian myth), is outside of Madras.

When the Portuguese arrived in Kerala on the west coast, they definitely found a Christian church. I had occasion to ask a Bishop there if any writings or records existed of the church before the arrival of the Europeans. I thought it would be fascinating to compare the teachings of St. Thomas that would have been untainted by Paul, Constantine, etc. Also, it would have been intriguing to know how Christianity impacted a people with a different history and mindset. However, the Bishop assured me that nothing—no records, no writings, no history—existed from the original Indian churches. I still wonder if he is correct. We also know that Marco Polo encountered Christians during his travels in India in the 13th century. He even wrote of St. Thomas' tomb.

That evening I join hundreds of pilgrims, most of them Hindus, in the main chapel for the healing service. The priest places a blessed wafer in a gold frame with a handle, rather like a hand mirror. Then he walks up and down the aisles, turning the wafer so everyone can receive the blessing. I do not know if there are any on-the-spot healings this evening, but the museum is full cases of silver parts and pieces of the body (the Mexicans call them "milagros") that people have sent in to commemorate their healings.

Later that evening, I join a program that is supposed to be a service and meditation. I know there will be no English spoken, but I have nothing else to do, so figure I may as well pick up the vibes. No one can deny that many Indians have a tendency to be verbose, but the speaker this evening is going for the long-winded awards for both the Christian clergy, in general, and Indian, specifically. For a while, I manage to sit peacefully doing my own meditation and just enjoying the space. Of course, we are all sitting on the bare marble floor, so after an hour my feet are feeling squashed and squealing: let me out of here. I look around to see how everyone else is faring. They are all doing very well; everyone else is sound asleep. Bless the Indians for their capacity to sleep in any situation. I smile as I wonder, which came first: the capacity to sleep through anything or the long-winded clergy? After another fifteen minutes of discomfort, the priest has not slowed down; he has not even taken a breath, so I beat a half-hasty retreat to the back exit.

Leaving early the next morning, I travel north for another unusual Indian phenomenon, this one Hindu. The bus takes off down a two-lane metalled (that's what they call asphalt here) road, shaded by tall, swaying palm trees. Small, clean adobe huts with large shady yards line both sides of the route. Here is the idyllic India that Usha and I have often dreamt of. I cannot wait to get back to Pondy to tell her that our paradise really does exist. Each yard is neatly swept, with a circular *kovalam* laid out at the door step. I think these are made of the traditional rice powder. I love this aspect of the Indian culture, giving a little gift of food to the animal kingdom each day. I practice it whenever it is practical. The modern Indians, living in cities, have totally lost this wonderful aspect of their culture, an appreciation and honoring of the natural world that sustained their ancestors for many centuries.

The modern Indian *gurus* who came to Europe and America were forced to massage Hinduism somewhat to suit the Western mindset. This included the Indian concept of reincarnation, which has no

negative connotation to being reincarnated as an animal. There were many sages described in the Puranas who reincarnated as deer, or monkeys. Even today the *sadhus* in Rishikesh say the monkeys that hang around the ashrams were former sages, now engaging in play in a monkey's body. There is no negative implication at all; animals are wonderful.

Once Swami Chinmayananda was challenged by an American about the horror and impossibility of "coming back" as an animal after one had reached the pinnacle of life; that is, incarnating in a human body. The Swami put his answer quite charmingly.

"What's wrong with it," he bellowed in his husky voice. "We Indians might be born as a dog in America. Now that would be an improvement for most of us in India, you will have to admit!"

My bus soon reaches the small town of Thirunallar, the site of a famous temple with a shrine to Shani, Saturn. Although many temples have small chapels honoring the planets, this is actually the only temple I know of that is dedicated to a planet and its ruler. Here, just as in Western astrology, Saturn is considered a villainous influence, so it is thought to be expedient to propitiate him in some way. I am able to observe a big ceremony with lots of flowers, flames and incense, performed on behalf of a couple of gentlemen, who have evidently paid a decent price for one of the more expensive rituals.

But Shani is not this temple's only claim to fame. It also has a shrine with an emerald *lingam,* which is worshipped with a special ritual at 12:00 noon daily. Since I have to wait over an hour until noon, I look around the temple, which is small and not particularly interesting architecturally. I am thinking that this stop was worthwhile only because it was on my route north back to Pondy. I am definitely off the beaten track, so I have no idea how to get to Pondy from here. I approach the two gentlemen mentioned above and ask them if they happen to know of any public transportation back to Pondy.

"No, I don't think you will find any public transport from here, but we are returning to Pondy now in our own car. You are welcome to accompany us."

"Well, that sure solves my problem easily." Really, I am rather aghast, and grateful, that the only two gentlemen in the temple who speak English, therefore, the only two I can question, are actually going to my destination. This does not happen often.

"But, of course, now you see how Shani can remove obstacles."

"It's sure made a believer out of me," I laugh. "I hope it works so well for all of your desires too."

The ritual bathing of the emerald *lingam* is much less elaborate and quite short. Of course, I am most curious to see if it is really an emerald. No, it is not. It looks like polished marble, but it is green; well, greenish. It definitely is not translucent like an emerald.

Some time or the other, I suppose I have to deal with the Hindu *lingam*/phallic symbol issue, so I guess it may as well be now, while I am beholding this emerald one. *Lingam* has always been translated as a phallic symbol ever since the Europeans arrived, before their time I can not say. Honestly, I have never seen a penis that looks like this *lingam;* perhaps my research has not been extensive enough. However, to me it does look like the cone of a nuclear reactor.

The Hindu religion is full of symbols and symbolism. The translation for *lingam* is "symbol,"so it is a symbol of Lord Shiva, thought or energy, as opposed to Shakti, form or force. Their union creates the universe, so using the representation of human parts is a valid method to show a union.

However, the mystics are aware that humans have a subtle body that is named the *lingam shariram,* or symbolic covering or body. I think the Shiva *lingam* is the shape of our subtle body. Also, some Shiva *lingams* are round or elliptical in shape, while others are very irregular. So I am not totally convinced that the Shiva *lingam* is a phallic symbol. However, considering this is the culture that produced the erotic art of Khajuraho and the *Kama Sutra,* anything is possible.

After the ceremony of the emerald *lingam*, I wait for the two men to change into their street clothes, as they had put on *dhotis* for the rituals. Then we start back for Pondicherry just at lunch time. Before we leave the small town, we stop at a restaurant that has no sign and is totally off the beaten track. They serve delicious vegetarian food—the green beans are actually still green, and the yogurt is fresh and sweet. This is the type of place the natives know about, but I never would have found it.

My hosts are perfect gentlemen. They speak of their adoring wives, their precocious children, and their doting parents. Of course, they are quite interested in me: what I am doing here and what I think of India. As usual, I end up doing most of the talking, when I would have learned more by listening.

They easily find 27 Francois Martin and drop me off at the front door. Usha has moved to the other side, the Indian side, of the sewage ditch that once served to separate the French and Indians. She and Maggie had a parting of the ways. Since I was not here when it happened, I never get the details. Maggie must have completed Larry's manuscript, but she had several others in her mind. Among her literary endeavors, she has written the first of a series retelling the *Mahabharatha* in a literary style in English. Usha would be helpful, since she knows a lot of the Indian lore. That's not to say that Maggie does not. She has thoroughly studied, and understood, many of the Hindu texts.

Usha is recovering from the blow of losing her job and her lovely home at Aradhana. She was able to move only because Maggie compensated her quite generously by giving her a lump sum of money to settle in a new place. In addition, she paid the necessary deposits and donated a very old refrigerator. One look at it and I see why it is running all the time. The door does not close completely, so we can get that repaired quite easily.

As much as we both loved Aradhana, this place is really better in many respects; except the location, for one cannot beat having Ganesha as a neighbor. Here we do not get beggars on the porch, only goats. And they do leave a bigger mess; we end up putting a fence to keep out them out.

The couple, who own the house, live in France where he serves in the French military. It's a modified Pondicherry style: the bedrooms surround a large courtyard. However, the courtyard is covered to keep out the rain, instead of remaining open to the sky, as is common here. The kitchen is in the back with the traditional open-air wire screening. Two enclosed stalls are off to the side: one for bathing and one with an Indian-style toilet (you squat).

Usha has rented the second floor, which is one huge L-shaped room that serves as a living, dining and kitchen. The wall where she set up the kitchen also has the open-air wire screening. A decent marble bathroom with British toilet (you sit instead of squatting), a small bedroom, plus two verandahs. There is a tiny one out back and a large one stretching across the front.

The surrounding yard is a huge compound, filled with four or five mud shacks of squatters. Usha points out to me the carpenter who built my desk at Aradhana lives in one of them. On the other side is a large garden of coconut trees and a few shrubs with flowers. Across the front of this garden, connecting the large house with the neighboring building is a small two room cottage. The owner's sister lives there with her alcoholic husband and two daughters. The sister serves as an on-site landlord.

I plan to stay for only one week because Usha will have a student boarding with her who will help her with Vibhu, her son. With Maggie's help, he has been accepted in the ashram school. Since Usha is not working yet, we have a great week together—except for a flood—on the second floor!

Most Indian houses have a drainage hole in several places in the walls, so that you can virtually hose off the floors, which are usually marble or hard concrete. One night while I am sleeping on a cotton mattress on the floor of the living room, I am awakened by a terrible monsoon storm. Half-awake, I hear the sound of water near me, so I jump up to investigate. Water is pouring into the room through the drainage hole from the verandah, and is just about to flow over the threshold of the wide French doors. I quickly start grabbing Usha's beautiful straw mats off the floor while I call out to wake her up.

Fortunately, she takes one look at the flooded verandah and immediately figures out the problem. She grabs a broom, then runs through the water on the verandah, now half-way up her calves. While she is jabbing to clear the blocked drain on the verandah, I grab my mattress and all the large pillows, piling them on the dining table. At last the water stops creeping across the floor. I managed to force the wooden plug back into the drainage hole, so that it will not come out again. Evidently, the force of the water had just pushed it out.

Then there was the snake-lizard incident. Since I take my daily pilgrimage to the library, every morning I get up, fold my sheets and arrange the mattress like a daybed before I take off. One afternoon when I return, Usha is all a-flutter because she found a snake lizard under my mattress. She is particularly furious because she has told the servant regularly that she must turn and check the mattress every day. Evidently, this is an Indian thing—and now I know why.
Anyway, Usha had some spare time today and was doing some extra cleaning and arranging of cushions after the dampness from the flood finally dried. When she moved my mattress, out lumbered a large, 3-foot snake lizard. Fortunately, it headed right for the door to the verandah and was seen no more, she reports.

Somehow, I just do not want to get into the subject of 3-foot snake lizards. It does seem that it has possibilities for developing into a theme for obsessing. Nevertheless, I do ask, “How do you think it got up here on the second floor?”

“It would have just climbed up one of the trees by the verandah and dropped down.”

Then, I poise the obvious question, “Do you think snake-lizards are poisonous?”

“Absolutely. Why do you think I have the servant turn the mattress every day?”

I did not know that; they only speak to each other in Tamil. I do know you have to remove and shake out your sheets every day to remove any small creepy crawlers. However, I just somehow refuse to let the incident disturb me because I know if I get into fear, I will have a rough time living here.

So I simply reply, “So I slept with a snake-lizard under my mattress last night? I bet he doesn’t find such a warm spot tonight.”

I could stay in Pondy indefinitely, but I keep remembering that in Bangalore Varadha told me that if I wanted to find a “true sage” that I should go to Kumbakonam. Now that I have gotten my impulse for travel out of my system, I decide I am ready for a peaceful retreat.

Chapter Twenty-four

Sages of South India

We seem inclined to place the world's sages in the immemorial past, so that our logical minds can dismiss their histories as myths with a few embellishments. Nevertheless, even in modern times, every century Bharata has engendered many incredible spiritual sages; most of them are in the predominate religion of Hinduism, but, remarkably, they exist in both Islam and Jainism also. Already we have met two Hindu sages, Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ramana Maharshi, who both died in the early 1950's.

I was quite intrigued to learn that there had been a Tamil Nadu sage who lived in a village near Pondy in the early 1900's. Revered by the local Christians and Moslems as well as the Hindus, Swami Ramalingam taught that ALL reduces to Light; therefore, there can be no real difference between substances, whether they be physical or mental. Note that the Hindus always include mind and emotions in the material world.

A poor *Brahman* boy, the future saint, Swami Ramalingam practiced meditation, along with memorizing and chanting of the Vedic scriptures. One day, when he must have been in a relaxed state, he looked into an ordinary mirror in his room and saw the image of a deity. An ordinary person may have thought, "gee, I am going crazy," or "someone is playing a trick"; thereby, dismissing the event. However, his level of consciousness was raised to such a subtle level that he realized that he and the image were one. They were one and the same. He was the deity in a grosser manifestation.

That realization removed his veil of ignorance to such an extent that he began receiving extraordinary revelations. On special occasions, he was invited to give lectures to his elder brethren. What I saw of his writings were quite off-the-wall: Long discourses recounting all the many universes, galaxies and worlds, including how they were created and connected. Long, long lists—any audience other than elder *Brahman* brethren would have "slept off," as we say here.

One bright day, when Swami Ramalingam was still a young man, in his mid-thirties, he realized that no one had understood a word he had taught. Further, he reasoned that they were not likely to do so in the future. He told everyone that he had ascertained that his work was ineffective to them, so he was just going to bow out. In the immitable style of Hindu sainthood, he told them he was going into his little hut (without food or water) and not to disturb him for thirty days. Indians being Indians could not abandon anyone, certainly not a saint, certainly not for thirty days. After only two weeks, a couple of devotees broke into the hut. They found no one there. The police were called in, but thorough investigations revealed no body, and no evidence of foul play.

Indian history is replete with such stories. I visited a temple outside Poona in 1979, where Shivaji, the most revered Marathi [one from Maharastra state] saint of all time, had ended his life by disappearing into a stone that still remains in the temple compound.

Since the site of Ramalingam's miracles is close, I take a bus from Pondy to Vadalur where he lived. First, I visit the small museum that has small dioramas that portray the major events in his life. Then I sit quietly in the small chapel to wait for the daily service at 11:00 a.m. To a small audience of only six, the priest begins the ceremony by removing one of the seven curtains, or veils, that obstruct the eternal divine light. Since this is an ordinary day, only three of the curtains are removed. Only at the winter

solstice are all seven curtains removed to reveal the Eternal Flame.

I decide I better eat before getting on the bus for Kumbakonam. After treading up and down the main street row of shop-stalls, really hovels, I finally enter the most likely hole-in-the-wall cafe. Of course, I am the only female customer. I explain that I want vegetarian food.

“Not possible,” I am told.

“That man has some vegetables; just give me some of those,” I instruct.

“Oh, yes, that is possible.”

“Then give me some rice too.”

While I eat, I chat with the friendly proprietor and a couple of the diners in kindergarten English.

As I am leaving the cafe, a man is entering. I am taken aback because he looks at me with such disdain that I think, *this must be a true* “*maha-chauvinist.*”

“She comes from the ashram to eat meat in a Moslem hotel,” he plainly voices his complaint as he disappears behind the door.

I had not realized that these were Moslems. Neither had I realized that you only ate meat in Moslem hotels. His assumption that I am from an ashram must be because of my simple unbleached homespun sari; others have drawn the same conclusion. I wonder if his comrades inside will inform him of the ordeal they went through to give me a vegetarian lunch.

I nearly miss the express bus for Kumbakonam. Not because I am late; I have been waiting 30 minutes when a ramshackled, beat-up contraption arrives. I hesitate, *this can't be the express bus.* To be sure, I step onto the bottom step and state that I am waiting for the express bus to Kumbakonam.

“This is the express bus,” the driver assures me.

Oh, dear, this is the express bus, I resign myself and climb aboard. Expecting the worst, I am pleasantly surprised. The bus actually has the lounge-type seats of the long distance buses.

“But there are no empty seats.”

“In the back,” the driver directs me.

“Madam, here’s a seat.” An elderly man of ample girth has commandeered one and one-half seats for himself. The two men behind him are now pointing to the empty half of a seat and insisting I take it. I squeeze in and close my eyes. I will not be able to see anything out the window, so I may as well relax.

When we arrive in Kumbakonam, I take one look out the window and panic. All I can see are simple mud huts. I doubt I will be able to find a decent place to spend the night here. *I better stay on this bus, find a town with a hotel, and come back tomorrow,* I resolve.

“Does this bus go on to Tanjavore?” I inquire of the seated passengers.

“No, you’ll have to change buses.”

I accept my fate and descend the dusty steps into the chaos of passengers, buses, bicycle rickshaws and chuck holes. Upon spotting a big “INFORMATION” sign, I immediately perk up. *Well, well, this is a new twist—information available at a village bus station,* I heave a sigh of relief. Then I approach the dark hole in a wall and inquire of the two men sitting on rickety folding chairs if they know of a Swami Rama. They debate back and forth for a few minutes, but nothing concrete emerges from the banter. Next I ask about the tourist office. Again some discussion follows in Tamil.

“Oh, yes—good. You can take an auto to the tourist office where you can get information.”

Forget the swami for now, I tell myself. I will be content with info about a hotel, for I still can see nothing but thatched-roofed huts in every direction. One of the men kindly escorts me to an auto rickshaw and tells the driver in Tamil to take me to the tourist office. We zoom off as if he knows where he is going. However, we arrive at a large residence.

I remark innocently, “No, the tourist office.”

Only then does he insist, looking me straight in the eyes, in his broken English, “Tourist office *idliya*.” No tourist office! And he is right, there is no tourist office in Kumbakonam. It’s most likely he helped me avoid a hassle, for service at the tourist offices is notoriously poor. The joke among the foreign tourists is that it is a case of “no chief and too many Indians.”

So I am quite content that he has found what looks like a place to stay. Certainly, it’s a step in the right direction. I pay him and he disappears around the corner.

When I enter the large, wide verandah of the comfortable, clean bungalow, only one person is visible: a sadhu-type, with his matted hair in long, wild *jadas* and red *paan*-stained lips, seated cross-legged on a wooden bed near the entrance. Fortunately, he speaks enough English to tell me that rooms are available here and the owner will return in 30 minutes.

The lodge faces a huge bathing tank—as big as a city block. At the four corners and the four mid-points of each side are small peaked pavilions. I cross the street and sit on the bank of steps near some women who are bathing, washing clothes, and dipping their babies in the cool water. Their system for public bathing without exposing themselves is well worked out. I watch one woman out of the corner of my eye as she first removes her blouse, while she holds the sari around her body. Then she pulls her petticoat up over her breasts and secures it by tying it tightly. Next she drops her sari inch by inch as she enters the water. She soaps—mostly exposed parts—then leaves the water with the wet petticoat clinging lightly to her body. One lady takes a turmeric root and rubs it on the wet granite step, grinding it into the bright yellow paste that she applies to her face. They are so engrossed with their tasks they do not seem to notice me. It’s such a lovely spot. I resolve to come back in the morning to feed the tiny minnows that are nibbling at my toes.

Meanwhile, thirty minutes have passed, so I return to the lodge. The owner/manager has just returned with a small boy carrying a satchel of books. They both gaze at me with blank stares. When I ask about a room, he immediately declares, “No, no. No rooms available,” and exits into a back room behind a closed door. I quickly percieve that I am dealing with a brick wall—*Brahman* style, so I pick up my suitcase and start down the steps.

On second thought, I pause and turn to ask the *sadhu*, who is still sitting on the day bed, “Sir, do you know of a Swami Rama here in Kumbakonam?”

“No, I don’t think so,” he honestly seems to ponder the question.

“He is an old man, over 90 years old, and is a Punjabi.”

“Oh, yes. You must mean Ram Sadhu. He stays on the other side of the river in Kottaiyur. You can catch the #1 bus around the corner. It will take you straight there.”

“Thank you very much, sir. This is very helpful.” For once I have a feeling I won’t have to get a second opinion.

When I turn the corner, I am most happy to see a row of several modern hotels ahead on the dusty road. The first one I pick is only 30 *rupees* per night, just my price. When I reach my room, I immediately take a cold bath—no hot water in the afternoon—and lie down for a rest. It seems as if I have been on the road for days instead of hours. *I can find the holy sage first thing in the morning,* I tell myself as I drift off.

At sunrise the next morning, I return to the tank with puffed rice to feed the minnows. They practically take the food right out of my hand. Two kingfishers, the black and white variety, entertain me with their great diving feats: spot a movement, hover in suspension, hover, hover, hover—now, plunge. They emerge with a silver sliver of a fish in the beak; they never miss.

I later find out that this is the famous tank. According to legend, *a kumbha*, a large water pot, happened to appear here after a big flood. Lord Shiva pierced the pot with an arrow, allowing its contents to flow out to create this sacred tank. A big festival commemorates the occasion every twelve years, when the waters of the Ganges are said to flow directly into the tank.

After savoring my favorite breakfast of *idlis* and coconut chutney at the hotel, I figure it is late enough to drop in on an ashram. I inquire from the desk clerk the whereabouts of the #1 bus stop and am directed to a flag pole up the street. After a short wait, I squeeze onto a bus that contains at least fifty people beyond its capacity. As always, I announce my destination loudly to the driver, then to the collector and surrounding folk, so they will tell me where to get off. Up until now, this technique has proven infallible.

We cross a bridge over the Kauveri River and then turn to follow the bank of the river, lined with trees and tiny huts. I relax and enjoy the scenery until, some thirty minutes later, a general rustle rolls through the bus when someone suddenly notices that we were one-half kilometer past Kottaiyur and I am still on the bus. The driver makes an unscheduled stop and I am pushed through the throng and out the front door. I am encouraged at what I see, for the area along the river is quite lush with palms and bamboo groves.

Upon inquiring, a man on the street points me toward the Ram Sadhu ashram. Then he orders a young boy who is playing nearby to escort me. The urchin accompanies me over a little bridge, down a path, past a jog in the road, to the gate of a school. Then a couple of students guide me to Ram Sadhu, who lives in a compound behind the school. We enter a small garden of hibiscus and other flowering shrubs, skirted with white-washed huts and tall shade trees. The sweet odor of jasmine drifts through the air. As I inhale the fresh air, both physically and mentally, I open myself to the upcoming experience.

The children call out, and a *brahmachari* comes out of a hut. They tell him that I am looking for Ram Sadhu.

“Have your breakfast first,”he invites, motioning me into the nearby thatched hut, which must be the kitchen.

“Thank you. I’ve already eaten.”

He bobbles his head and the three of them accompany me to the Sadhu, who is sitting on a cement bench in the shade of a large tree. Ram Sadhu is a very sturdy man, still quite muscular for his age. The ring of gray hair circling his bald head and his short untrimmed beard are both gray. With his chest bare, he only wears a faded short orange *dhoti* around his hips.

After we are introduced and exchange “*namastes*,” I briefly explain to him my situation, since I have no idea how much English he understands.

Then he looks straight at me and says in English, “The spiritual life is to be lived. It can’t be talked about. You can stay here with us one,” he hesitates, “or two days. Then you can see what I mean."

“I will have to go back to the hotel to get my things. I can go now because I also have to find a bank and change some money to pay the hotel bill.”

“What’s the hurry? You have time to sit and rest. I’ll show you to your room.” He calls a hefty Punjabi gentleman to bring a bedroll for me. We enter a one-room cottage with a tiny porch that will be my home for the next few days. He rolls out the thin wool blanket and straw mat over a solid wooden bed.

“You just relax, that’s all.”

I leave at approximately 11:00 a.m., so I will be sure and have time to go to the bank and check out of the hotel before noon. I am not sure if it is an Indian, 24 hours after check-in, or European, 12 noon, style check-out time.

“I’ve come with my things, Swamiji,”I greet him as I hand him a small box containing sweet *laddhus* and a salt snack.

“Bless you, my daughter. Now you just relax. You are that very God, so how can you worry. There is none other than that One, so you must be that God.”

“Now that is exactly what I find very hard to believe.”

“But it is so, my daughter. That is all you need to know. But to know it one must live alone.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone in solitude. It is the only way.”

Again, he guides me to my room and asks if I need anything.

“No, no nothing at all,” I assure him.

Each afternoon there is a *satsang* of the four or five men who live in the small compound. I have no idea what to expect since everyone here speaks Tamil. A learned *Brahman*, Sri Shiva Ramakrishna, gives a commentary on the *Tulasi Ramayana*, which he has translated into Tamil. I understand not a word, but I do not mind. Quite content to be in such a beautiful place with such good company, I try to meditate for the entire hour. It’s good practice for my ankle bones, sitting on a cement floor with just a light blanket for padding.

After the class, Ram Sadhu tells the manager and the other two men present that I am a spiritual seeker whom he has invited to stay in the ashram for a few days. Further, he tells them, “we will serve her in whatever way we can.”



Ram Sadhu in his garden

I have noticed that *Annaji* [“elder brother” in Tamil], the manager, wears a bandage on a couple of toes. Later the *Brahman* explains to me that he had once been a leper, therefore, an outcaste. This had been during the time Ram Sadhu was living alone in the near-by woods, so he took the young man in and healed him with herbal medicines. Various devotees were always seeking out Ram Sadhu, asking if they could help him in any way. After Annaji was healed, Ram Sadhu suggested that some of them help the young man set up a service project in the community. At first he passed out flour and rice to the poor from a small hut. Over the years, using the money from the devotees of Ram Sadhu, the hut expanded into the orphanage for 100 boys. Later he added an elementary school that also included the village children. Ram Sadhu was persuaded to come live in the ashram some ten years ago when he was 87 years old. By then, the forest in which he had continuously lived alone was cleared, the land plowed under, and planted in crops.

That night after dinner, I hear a rap at my door. When I open it I am surprised to find the Sadhu. Earlier when I left the kitchen, I noted that the lights were out in his cottage, so I thought he had retired early.

“Is everything okay?” he asks with a beaming smile.

“Oh, yes. Everything is fine.”

“Do you need drinking water?”

“I have some.”

“And there is water available for your morning bath?”

“Yes, everything is fine.”

Chapter Twenty-five

This Is the Life

For the next couple of days, I begin the day by imbibing nature's beauty. In the beginning, I am content to walk through the lovely *ashram* garden. By the second evening, I am eager to expand my territory, so I set out to explore along the Kauveri. I walk toward town to look for a stall selling soap for washing my clothes. Since I travel so lightly, I already have a suitcase full of dirty clothes. You will be surprised to know that in India all clothes are washed by hand. I am even more surprised to find out I am washing all of my clothes by hand.

On the way I notice a tall *gopura,* tower, of a very old temple. On my return, I turn down a narrow lane and enter the temple. I am greeted by a young friendly priest who is quite eager to show me around. With his half-dozen English words and my half-dozen Tamil words, we somehow manage to communicate.

The temple was built in the Kumbakonam style—very long and narrow. One must go deep into the cave-like darkness to arrive in the sanctum sanctorum with its presiding deity. In this case, it's Siva, represented by a coal black lingam, adorned with three stripes of yellow sandalwood paste and a big red dot of *kumkum*. I find a flower of mirrors nearby with an octagonal center and eight petals more intriguing. A ghee lamp is lit and placed exactly so that the flame reflects in the center of each petal. The one light by whose reflection all else glows with the Light of Life. I breathe in the peace and sanctity of old Bharata.

Returning to the *ashram*, I choose the high path along the river. To my delight, behind the temple I discover a lovely pond complete with blue hyacinths, water lilies, and a new variety of water bird that can walk over the hyacinth leaves. Charmed by the natural beauty, I determine that this is the perfect spot to come and enjoy nature after my early morning meditation and yoga session.

The next morning I trip lightly over to the pond with my little straw mat in hand. I find a semi-decent path down the sloping bank to the pond. On my way, I note little piles of droppings scattered about in the various short weeds and grass. Since the ants have converted them into little hills of crumbled dirt, I pay little attention to this ever-present evidence of human proximity. Fortunately, I find a strip of clean, dry grass where I spot some long-toed birds walking on lily pads, near, but not too close to frighten them. Spreading my little straw mat on the grass, I sit down to space out.

The water lilies, patiently waiting the touch of sunshine, are only partially open. The hyacinths are completely closed, for they evidently require full sun to wake them up. On the opposite shore in a dense bamboo grove, a kingfisher sits in alert contemplation and waits for a ripple in the water. Although he does not display such dramatics in fishing as his black and white cousin, he is definitely more colorful. In the shade, he appears to be a royal blue. However, when he darts out into the sunlight, he reveals a dazzling iridescent turquoise, the same as the peacock. When he fishes, he swoops and skims the top of the water, not daring to plunge into the water.

Although I have to venture several footsteps out into the mud of the pond to do so, I manage to pluck a splendidly fresh white water lily with a fringed yellow center. Clutching my prize, I start to climb the slope to the main path that skirts the river. As I do so, an elderly man on the main trail starts yelling something at me. I am quite taken aback. Perhaps he sells the water lilies at the market and thinks I'm

stealing his stock. But this seems quite a fuss over one flower.

Wait a minute. Now I remember that while I was sitting at the pond, I could hear several groups of men pause, comment and move on. Having people around is so normal that I had not given it any thought. The truth now dawns. I have been sitting in the men's toilet. I see men come down to the riverside in the early morning for their daily dump, but I guess this group prefers grass to water. I must have forced quite a few to have to pollute the river this morning. I do note that they did not use their normal place because of my presence. In contrast, the men at the river are quite uninhibited about baring their behinds to all and sundry. They practically squat at each other's feet. Interestingly, judging from their dress, the river dippers are the higher caste.

I had asked Ram Sadhu for permission to ask him some questions and tape the conversation. So that morning, I start my query, "Swamiji, you follow the Vedanta thought that all life is *Brahman*. So how can one know what is best for the spiritual life and what is not?"

"Let the world be, we are talking about Life itself. Life is everywhere; there are no differences in the Life. There is only one Life that appears in different forms in the material world."

"Well, I can understand that, at least, intellectually," I reply.

"Only Life is always there."

"But to connect this body with that Life. When I try to make the jump, somehow I miss the boat."

"But this body is in the Life. There is no jump to be made," he comments, then sits back thoughtfully.

"Do you think that when someone is enlightened, it is generally because of their *karma*?"

He looks up, "Well, of course that is a factor."

"So we cannot say that enlightenment is due to self-effort in this life time. It is because of *karma,* or past efforts."

"Not so, because enlightenment has nothing to do with this mind and body."

"Yes, I do realize that," I reply in a studied voice. "*Karma* only effects the mind and body. But I keep thinking that I should do the 'right' thing. That's my biggest mistake. I'm perpetually deciding what is the right thing for me to do."

"It's all in your head. This is right and that is wrong. What you think is right for you is wrong for others. The only 'right' thing is that you must know your true Self." He pauses then continues, "I am the Life. This idea must come up. That is the spiritual life. That is all."

"Yes. That's really what has me puzzled. What exactly is a spiritual life? I know some people in the normal world are as spiritual as those in *ashrams* and monasteries."

"It's a simple thing."

"I know I am making it difficult."

"Eat and live in peace. Then you will understand your true, divine Self. That, my child, is the spiritual life."

He gets up and scoots across the room indicating that the session is over. Then he turns back. "As for thinking, I am this little, limited body, this idea must go. I am the Life that exists everywhere, this idea must come up."

Since this is my third day here, I also have my note of thanks all prepared, so I take out the envelope and

hand it to him.

Friday, December 14, 1990
Dear Swamiji,

I thank you for these two days to relax and enjoy the peaceful atmosphere here. Actually, you have not told me anything I did not know. I had reached the same conclusion for myself in the U.S. and that is why I came to India—for a period of serious *sadhana,* which I consider to be an absolute necessity for my further progress. First, I went to an *ashram* near Bangalore, but they were building a nature cure clinic and wanted the American to be the director, plus there was other funny business going on there. So I left, I did not have to leave America to find this sort of thing. Recently, I've been roaming about. Certainly, it is partially because I do not have the capacity to sit quietly. I do not want to blame anyone else. I would like to be able to sit quietly for long periods of time, but until then I will just keep moving along. Thank you again for your kindness and care toward me.
Sincerely,
s/Nancy

Along with the note, I give him the white water lily and a 100 *rupees* note.

"Where did you find this?"

"If there is a lily pond anywhere around, I am sure to find it!"

"It is so beautiful. . . And what is this?"

"This is a letter to you."

"And this?" as he unfolds the *rupee* note.

"That is *dakshina*."

"*Dakshina?* I don't need any *dakshina*. . . Now you explain to me what is in this letter; what you want to say. Afterward, I will read the letter, then I will understand your mind."

So I relate to him the gist of its contents. When I am nearly finished he interrupts me.

"Now? What about now?"

"You told me I could stay a day or two here, so I have now completed two days."

"But now? What is your program now?"

"Now I have no fixed program. I am free. Well, except I do have to be in Pondy on January 5 to pick up my visa renewal."

"Then you stay here with us. It's peaceful here, you can stay here and enjoy the true Life with us. Here we only live the spiritual life, not the material life. The boys here said they will be happy to serve you."

Tears well up in my eyes and start to roll down my cheeks. "I hope I deserve it."

"My dear daughter, you just be happy here. There is no worry. The Lord himself has sent you to me. He who creates will also maintain. That is His duty, your only duty is to appreciate."

"Thank you, you are so kind."

"Of course, for you are my daughter. Now you have not eaten breakfast. You must eat. Afterwards, we can discuss these little details."

After the *Brahman's* talk that day, Ram Sadhu informs everyone I will be remaining with them, then reiterates that they should all serve me in any way possible. I always manage to be at peace in the class in spite of the unknown language, for I always challenge myself to sit for the entire hour without moving.

It is not until the evening that what is happening begins to dawn on me. Here I am at this moment: A result of 1001 past decisions, accidents, missed opportunities, failures and successes, forces—seen and unseen, wrong judgments and right conclusions, all dumped into a caldron to somehow brew up the present situation.

I truly want to savor this lovely, precious, fragile life in all its splendor, but with all my grasshopper-ant conditioning, I intermittently feel guilty at doing nothing at all. We can't sing and dance today, as we must worry for tomorrow—but tomorrow we are going to die! I have always said that all I really wanted to do was enjoy the birds and flowers, feed the animals, and walk in the woods. Here is someone telling me to do just that. Will I be able to endure the peace? It is one thing to say all I want to do is sit peacefully and enjoy the birds and flowers, and another to be able to it.

When I greet him the next morning, Ram Sadhu smiles and pats me on the head. "You enjoy the life here. The Life itself is God. Your body is the temple, the temple for the divine Life. That's all I can tell you. You must live the Life."

By the fifth day my daily routine is established. I awaken at about 4:00 a.m. (without an alarm—now this is a miracle), brew a cup of black tea with my electric coil, steam my eyes, wash my face, then sweep the floor and porch. The activity awakens me enough for meditation on my porch under the spreading lacy leaves of the *neem* tree. I put a sheet around me to ward off the cool early morning air, but I only sit on my little straw mat, as my legs and ankles will hurt no matter what, so no need to cause commotion over finding a cushion. When my mind really starts running and my legs complaining, I get up and do some stretching exercises. About this time, a cup of tea arrives from the kitchen. Thus fortified, I continue my attempt to meditate until 6:00 a.m.

After meditation, I go indoors for fifteen or twenty minutes of yoga, including *surya namaskara,* the salutation to the sun routine. By sunrise I am out by the river to watch the sun's rays color the clouds that stretch across the east. The clouds are plentiful as it is still east-coast monsoon season. I poke and piddle around, looking for anything unusual in the river bed, while feeding any fish I spot for my daily *bhuta yagna.*

The scriptures ascribe five daily offerings. *Bhuta yagna* is to offer food to our animal friends. Since most of the birds here are either insect or nectar eaters, I have not had any success in attracting any of them with food—except the voracious crows.

The Sadhu always locks the gate to the river after lunch while everyone is resting and again at night. One day, just as he is locking the gate, I scramble up the steps.

"I was feeding the fish—*bhuta yagna*—with some rice leftover from lunch," I reply to his questioning look.

"Don't you know that it's a *bhuta yagna* when you feed yourself," he replies with a chuckle.

After my morning walk, I have 30 minutes to bathe and put my laundry in the bucket to soak. Mosquito-buzzing time is over, so I open the shutters to let in the fresh air. As soon as I am bathed and dressed in a clean sari, I go to greet the Sadhu with a "*namaste*" while he is sitting in his cottage reading the newspaper.

One morning, shaking his head in disbelief, then looking into my eyes, he tells me, "So there you were in America. Now you've come all this way and found me here."

"It's a miracle, isn't it?" I reply with a broad smile.

“We can never guess the ways of the Lord. We never know what is next.”

Breakfast of rice gruel, sometimes mixed with *dal*, arrives at my door about 8:00 a.m. Afterwards, I sit outside on a cement bench in the garden. I read and watch the little sun birds, which frequent the hibiscus flowers. Since tea is always served after the meal, it arrives some time during this hour. The winter sun is tolerable until 9:30 a.m., then I flee to my cool, shady room where I read, or write, until 12:30 p.m.

Lunch is always plain unpolished white rice with a soupy sauce of *dal* and a vegetable. About once a week there is a special meal at the orphanage, as it is the custom among the Hindus to do some charitable deed on certain occasions like birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and anniversaries of the parents’ death. The family who makes the donation often come to eat with us or at least to greet Ram Sadhu. However, the Sadhu and Annaji never eat the special food from these occasions as it has extra oil or ghee. Or it may contain onion or garlic, both of which are considered counter-productive to a meditative life.

Ram Sadhu insists that his diet of rice, *dal* and vegetable is essential to meditation. “If you want it know a person’s mind, watch what he eats,” he declares.

One evening, I cross the river and walk west down the south bank. I pass wide expanses of rice fields when I come to a tiny village where the women and children throng to gape at the stranger. They attempt to speak to me, but I have to give them my usual “Tamil *idliya*.” A young man, who is standing down the path a short distance , is called over. He speaks enough English to ask what I am doing here, which is really all they want to know. I explain that I am simply walking, enjoying the beauty of the “*pu*” and “*pakshi*.” (I have to show off the few Tamil words I know.) When he explains to the women, they are all smiles, seeming to approve of my interest in the “flowers” and “birds.” Their huts are built off in a group to one side, not lined along the dirt road track, which is the usual custom here.

I continue walking until I come across a lovely banyan tree, an incredulous sight of a holy maze. This variety of banyan forms roots on the branches that eventually reach the ground and start another tree, until one cannot discern where one tree ends and the other begins. The Hindus hold this tree sacred, and often a platform or altar has been built under it. Here there is a huge raised platform made of granite stone and cement. Walking up the steps, I see several small stone chapels: one contains an image of Hanuman, a devotee of Rama who was the hero in the *Ramayana*.

Another enshrines Kali, the Mother Time who laps up one and all in the end. The awesome black Kali with her necklace of skulls is not worshipped out of fear, but is invoked to help in removing obstacles or any negative forces. In her case, she is dancing on her consort, the masculine energy that empowers her dance of creation and death. The platform is bordered with a three-foot wall, most of which is edged with metal spears. Each shaft is tied with a red rag and topped with a green *nimbu* (lime).

As I proceed down the path, I pass an area of natural forest, then orchards. No fruit yet, but I conjecture that they are guavas; then I pass large banana and coconut plantations. A few mud huts for the laborers are scattered along the route. I suddenly realize that it’s so late I better find the bus to go back to the *ashram* since night is approaching.

At that moment, I approach a lovely area, full of tall, spreading coconut palms. Mud huts with thatched huts are scattered through the palms—an exact replica of the ideal of a primitive, simple life in nature. I am beholding a picturesque Shangri-La. Seeing the huts are so artistically created, I figure that they were privately built by the occupants and not some government or landowner tenement for field laborers. Yet I know the setting is an illusion; the huts will be dark, damp and full of mosquitoes—and probably mice. Even so, there is something so appealing about not ever having to pay rent. Of course, they do have to work to pay for food, but at one time the people of these idyllic villages would have grown all of their own staple crops.

As I pass by, several people come out to see the stranger and I greet them cheerfully. One gentleman among them speaks decent English. After replying to the five standard questions: “What country?” “What is your name?” “Are you alone?” “Where are you coming from?” “What are you doing here?” I ask one of my own: “How can I get back across the river?”

I am instructed to continue on and just ahead there will be a place to cross the river. I will then be in Swamimolai, where I can catch a bus. He was right; the path soon turns and crosses the river via stone steps down to its bed. Darkness is falling fast as I follow the narrow lane over to the bus stop by the spires of a mosque.

When I return to the *ashram*, no one is around, so I busy myself with my normal routine for no one ever inquires of my comings and goings. After supper, I am at the outdoor faucet washing my stainless steel plate with ashes from the wood stove and a chunk of coconut husk, when the Sadhu approaches.

“It’s so dark. Can you see okay?”

“It’s fine, Swamiji. I’m not afraid of the dark.”

“Yes, but you returned after dark tonight. I think you better at least tell us in which direction you are going when you leave the *ashram*.”

“I walked on the other side of the river because there is more natural beauty—and less traffic and people—over there.”

“You crossed the river?” His voice expresses a tone of surprise.

“Yes, I crossed the river, walked as far as Swamimolai, then crossed back over the river and caught a bus.”

“Achaa [yes],” he chuckles.

At least he knows that I was not out buying some goodies to stuff my face. There is not even the common tiny stall with *bedis* and bananas—India’s version of the 7-11—in the other side of the river.

Daily, I watch the life at the river. The river is ever flowing, in perpetual motion; unconcerned about who bathes, who drinks, who swims, who washes clothes in its water. Enjoy me! Enjoy me! I just keep rolling on and on and on, it sings. But the river is mistaken.

Chapter Twenty-six

Life of the River

Before the sun has appeared to radiate its warm rays on the sand and water, the river bank is visite by a few sand pips and black and white wagtails, along with a few early risers who come for their morning dump. They will wait for the sunlight before returning to take their baths in the same waters. Aournd 8:00 a.m. the river beach becomes the bathhouse and laundromat for men only. The bathers first wash their *dhotis*, which they then stretch out on the sand to dry while they bathe. A couple of men carry a long pole with them to stick in the groud so they can tie their wet *dhotis* on it to wave like prayer flags in the breeze. For a mile along the river, a brown, round backside shines in every direction.

Around 9:00 a.m., the men clear out and the women and children take over for bathing and washing clothes. The children run and splash in the water while their mothers take long, leisurely baths. While sitting in waist-deep water, they soap themselves lavishly, then rinse by pouring cool water over their bodies with a small brass pot.

When the women and children leave about 10:00 a.m., the dairyman arrives with his herd of buffalo, around two dozen, for their daily baths. The buffaloes love water, so we Americans always call them water buffaloes. The Indians cannot understand why I do not just say “buffalo.” They give richer milk in greater quantities than a cow, but I find a slight twang to the milk. The buffaloes are rather lazy, plodding creatures and love to laze around in a muddy pool on a hot summer day.



They have never been trained as a draft animal, which I thought was strange since some of them are huge, the size of two or three cows put together. Then I heard a story of one fellow who had trained his buffalo to pull a cart, and it seemed to have adjusted. One day they were plodding down a hot, dusty road when suddenly the buffalo spotted a pond over to the side of the road. Now buffaloes seldom run, but this one ran hell bent for a nice cool dip, leaving the driver, cart, straw flying to the wind.

From the river bank, I can see the clothes washed downstream by the *dobhis,* billowing on make-shift clothes lines. I never use these washermen because, although their beating-on-the-rocks technique works well on simple cloth, seams become worn, the buttons broken, and the zippers destroyed. Also, they never spot-check anything—it's simply beat and dry. Any stains remain as is, or are added unto.

The indispensable *dobhi* is on the lowest rung of the lowest caste because he touches the menstrual saris. Actually, his wife is supposed to wash them, but he gets contaminated also by association. Even in the *dobhi* caste, there is a hierarchy based on family, experience, and quality of work. If one *dobhi* wants to insult another he may tell him, "You are so stupid you wash cotton and silk clothes on the same stone."

In Bangalore near the Aurobindo Bhavan, there is a *dobhi* colony—two rows of government-built tiny huts with their own temple in center front. The *dobhis* spread out in every direction each morning on bicycles to pick-up the bundles of clothes from homes or children's uniforms from residential schools. No one ever brings their clothes to the colony personally. The *dobhi* is considered a necessit, a home with air conditioner, color TV, VCR, and microwave will not have a washing machine. To purchase one would mean that they would cause their *dobhi*s to lose work. How they manage to wash the clothes in the muddy lakes and ponds and produce white clothes is what I call one of India's miracles.

Mid-day is quiet at the river since all creatures flee to the shade to rest in the simmering heat of December. Every afternoon, there is a major convening of crows. They sit in the tops of trees cawing, then descend to the water's edge where there is a constant dance of jockeying for position—who bathes first, who gets the best pool, continual flapping and hopping and fussing as they approach, challenge, then give ground. When they are finally satisfied that they have completed their ablutions, they fly back to the tree tops to preen and boast with their noisy crow vocals.

On Sundays a few school children come for a picnic—but the Indians are not fond of picnics. One Indian described them as "a device invented by the British to make eating inconvenient." Often when they go for a picnic, it is just an outing to a scenic spot and there is no food. Well, I must correct that, you will not ever find an Indian without a bag of food. What I mean is that on a picnic they will have the usual bags of snacks, fruit and candies that go with them everywhere, but no particular meal.

Since I am going to remain here, I leave early one morning to go to town to buy supplies toward a permanent stay: plastic bucket, detergent, cleaning agents for walls, etc. Upon arriving, I first find to the Post Office and buy several inland letters, then walk over to a restaurant for breakfast. I now have a plan to short-circuit their custom of serving the tea after the meal. I want tea immediately. When I order, I mention the tea first: "one cup of *chaya* tea, bring it first, and one plain *dosa* [rice pancake], bring it second." I repeat, "*chaya* first," holding up one finger, then "*dosa* second," holding up two fingers. My efforts paid off as I am served the tea first. But five minutes later, I am served two *dosas.* Immediately, I realize my communication error, but I do not even attempt to explain to them. I eat one and one-half *dosa* with no problem. For the remainder of my journey, I use a different technique: first, I order tea; only after it is brought to me, do I order the breakfast dish.

In the market, I have to meander through a labyrinth of vendors for ten minutes or so before I find the type of shop I want. The proprietor of the small stall insists on offering me a cool drink. Enjoying the pause to sit a few minutes, I slowly sip the cold, sweet *nimbu pani,* limeade. I have no idea where the water came from. This is one of those occasions I simply have to throw caution to the wind for the sake

of politeness. In the countryside and villages I do not have to worry because the water comes from wells.

The young man then gives me directions to the stall where I will find notebooks. I buy a large thick one, for I am determined to keep a daily journal. I have been taking sporadic notes in a diary, but now I am going to be thorough. Writing daily does not come easily for me; I guess for the same reason I never enjoyed spectator sports. However, I am going to make the effort, for Ram Sadhu is too great not to share with others.

This morning when I told the Sadhu I was going to town to get some supplies, he replied that he could get me anything I needed. It was not necessary for me to go out.

"I need to go the Post Office and also to purchase some small items that I may be particular about, like shampoo and a journal."

"You go, but you do not have to tell me. You can come and go as you please. This is your home."

When I return that afternoon before *satsang*, he again mentions, "I can get you anything you need. You don't have to bother to go to town."

I had my daily exercise traversing the marketplace, so in the evening I just putter around the river and make a startling discovery: The river is totally clear of all people after 6:00 p.m. I have the whole place all to myself. I stretch out on the dry sand and dream dreams of far away places embellished with moonbeams glowing through palm leaves.

December 19, 1990
Today was a normal day with no particular ups and downs until my evening walk. As usual I cross the river and choose a path I have not taken before, heading due south away from the river. The path skirts rice fields and a couple acres of sugar cane. Definitely, a productive terrain, I note. An old woman—really ancient, her dark leathery skin hangs loose on her thin body—is plodding along beside me. She is bent from the weight of a huge burlap sack, stuffed with fodder, so heavy that she weaves as she walks.

To my surprise I come across a small village in the middle of nowhere. As I pass the yard of the first thatched hut on the path, the largest buffalo I have ever seen, sporting a fear-inspiring set of horns, looks up and starts toward me. Thank goodness, I can see that it is securely tethered. *Good Lord,* I think, *don't tell me that even a buffalo can recognize a stranger.* However, the mystery is soon solved when the old woman, who had fallen behind me, crosses over and dumps her load of grass for the big fellow.

The children and women in the yards of the huts remain quiet as they watch me pass. In the center of the village, I am surprised to see a couple of "cement" houses. I have not seen any of these city-type houses on this side of the river. On the steps of the veranda of the largest one, a young man is sitting along with several children. He stands up and motions for the children to stand also. I greet them with a "*namaste*" and they return it.

He then asks the expected: "Where are you from?"
Then, "What are you doing lonely here?"

"I am just walking."

"But you are lonely. Why isn't someone with you?"

"I guess because I know how to walk by myself."

"But no one walks lonely here."

By now I am moving slowly down the path. "Good-bye," I call over my shoulder. I walk farther down the path, which is broad enough to be called a road, but definitely not adequate for cars. I greet several curious-eyed children with a "*namaste.*" The road begins cutting even further away from the river

through beautiful bright green rice paddy. One irrigation pond is full of lovely lilies with a large white crane fishing in its shallow water. Finally, I have to give up on finding a path that cuts across to the river. Although I do not want to, I begin to retrace my steps.

Just as I feared, everyone is on alert: There is a white lady in the village. A gaggle of giggling children soon surrounds me. I am prevailed upon by the parents of one little back-eyed cherub to bless him. When I pass the young man's house again, he jumps up and asks me in—which means to sit on the veranda, never inside the house. Actually, any wandering *sadhu* or traveler is welcome to sleep on these verandas should he arrive in a village in the night.

The young man says he wants to talk to me for five minutes. I agree and take a seat on the long wooden bench. His elderly mother, in a heavy silk sari with her ear lobes covered with large disks of gold and a diamond gleaming from her nostril, is sitting on a side bench. Although I am sure she does not know a word of English, she wants a good look at the strange phenomenon. Every child in the village is crowded into the tiny space between the verandah and compound fence, making it appear that the verandah is off-limits for them.

The young man, in his mid-20s, starts to pose his questions, beginning in the Indian subtle mode: "What are you doing here?"

"I'm staying at the *ashram* for *sadhana*."

"What?"

"At the ashram across the river."

"The Swami Ramalinga Ashram?"

"Yes." I am surprised to hear it referred to as a Swami Ramalinga Ashram. However, there is only one ashram, so I do not want to complicate matters by debating its name.

"So you are doing service there in the school and boys' home?"

"No, I am not. They are being managed quite well by Indians."

"So what are you doing?"

"I told you, *sadhana*. You are an Indian, you know what *sadhana* means, spiritual practices, like meditation and study of the scriptures."

"So what are you studying?"

"Hindu philosophy."

"So if you are doing service at the ashram, that's okay."

"But, as I told you, I am not doing any service."

"So what are you doing?"

"Sir, I cannot see that I have to explain my actions and motives to you."

"Oh, I do not mean to be personal."

I take the opportunity to change the subject, "So how long has your family lived in this house?"

"Five years, it is five years old. It is my older brother's house. He works in Saudi Arabia."

“I see, so you own land here?”

“Yes, we are landlords. But I am going to be a commercial man and make a lot of money. Commerce is where the money is.”

At that moment, we are interrupted by the servant, who has appeared with a stainless steel tumbler of hot milk, well sugared. The mother takes the tumbler from the tray and then carefully puts it into my hands. I am sizing her up, probably not from Tamil Nadu as she only has one nose diamond; definitely, must be south Indian, judging from the heavy silk *sari,* but not Kerala, they only wear cotton. She could be from Andhra Pradesh because they have a tendency to immigrate to get good farm land. But I am not sure though, for a high caste Andhra women would be listening behind the door, not out in plain sight.

As I take a sip of the rich, buttery buffalo milk, he continues, “Yes, I’m going to be a wealthy magnate. I will be able to help these poor people.”

Then he points to the village children, all dressed in virtual rags, but none looking hungry. “That is my true desire.”

“What will you do to help them?”

We volley back and forth a minute as he does not understand what I mean.

“I will build something like the Swami Ramalinga ashram school, but first one has to have the financial base.”

“One does have to be careful though, we can get so carried away with making money and accumulating things that we forget the ideals of our youth.”

“I see what you mean. Do you feel you have forgotten your ideals?”

“The truth is I don’t recall having any ideals in my youth; I was much too self-centered. I don’t think I have ever given much thought to the future at all, not in my entire life. But I certainly think to have a goal like yours is very commendable.”

“But one has to have a financial base... [a pause] Will you give me the address of your organization in America?”

“I have no organization in America.”

“You know, the one that sent you here to do service.”

“No organization sent me. I came on my own.”

“But that is impossible, someone had to pay for your tickets here and your travel.”

“I paid for them myself.”

“I don’t believe you. It is impossible. Your parents, an organization, someone paid for your trip.”

“It is possible because that is what I did.”

“No...”

“Look, your brother is working in Saudi Arabia. I’m sure he makes enough money for his trip back and forth. He has even saved money to send here to build this house. So how can you say it is impossible?”

I stand up with my final words, “I need to go now.”

I turn and wish his mother “*namaste,*” then start down the steps.

"By God's grace, may we meet again," his words follow me out the gate.

Well, it will not be by my grace, I think, *because I certainly will not take this route again*. I do not relish these tedious conversations, although I do learn something about how the locals think and live.

Because of the delay, fifteen minutes or so, I arrive back at the river after the sun has set, so it is totally deserted. Even so the sky is streaked with an afterglow of color, so I stand motionless for a few moments to take it in. However, the dim light presents me with a challenge when I try to find a place to cross the river. I have learned that the narrow strips in the river are often the deepest. The wider places where the river spreads out and makes ripples, which I first thought were currents, are actually the shallowest crossings. Tail of my *sari* in hand, I pick my spot and wade in what turns out to be ankle-deep water, enjoying the cool water on my hot, dusty feet.

Day by day the river is disappearing. A week ago I was lucky to find a crossing that was only knee deep; now it's ankle deep. When I reach the dry shore, I pause again to catch another long inspiration from the streaks of purple and rose stretching across the dark sky. Then, taking in the wonder of that quiet twilight moment, I twirl a couple of times with my arms out-stretched in joy.

As I turn and start back to the *ashram* steps, I catch a glimpse of a solitary figure moving along the river. As it approaches, I realize it is Ram Sadhu. I have never, ever seen him out of the *ashram* compound before.

"Good evening, my darling daughter."

"Good evening, my revered Father," I respond with a smile.

The sky has darkened enough that the crescent moon is now shimmering on the horizon. Together we look up at it. Then he places both hands on top of his walking stick and looks straight into my eyes.

"It's the second day, two digits. Night before last was the dark night. Our *rsis* did such a great task in observing, then naming, all aspects of nature. The moon has been divided into sixteen *kalas*, or sections, of time. Each *kala* bears the name of a woman." Weaving back and forth while leaning on his cane, he represents a perfect picture of the Wizard Merlin.

"These names represent the different parts of the manifested creation?"

"They are the different energy levels that create the different manifestations."

"I see."

He turned and spread his hands, "The Life is everywhere expressing its joy. Oh, you cannot imagine what wonderful times I have spent here. I used to lie right out on the warm sand and sleep. There were no buildings, no lights, no one at all in those days. All this civilization has appeared in the last twenty-five years."

"How old were you when you left your family?"

"About thirty, but I always knew this was the life for me. Even when I was a boy, I understood that everything is God. My mother taught me all these things; she was such a devotee. She also taught me the *Ramayana*. Every night she would have me recite some verses before I slept. If I forgot and slept off, she would even wake me up and say, 'My son, recite just a few verses for me.' She did not make it seem like something I had to do, but that it was something that gave her such great pleasure. Of course, it made me happy to please my mother. Gradually, I memorized many long passages from the *Ramayana*.

"We were *Brahmans* and lived a religious life. No one was surprised or bothered when I left home. It was natural for me; everyone knew that it would happen sooner or later."

As we reach the steps up to the *ashram* compound, Venus is twinkling near the new moon. He mentions that there was a notice in today's paper that the dam, upstream from us, is full and the authorities will be releasing water tomorrow.

"So you must be cautious in your wanderings tomorrow."

"Yes. I will. I am so happy; tomorrow we will have a river again."

Occasionally, Ram Sadhu comes in and sits on a wooden bench as the rest of us eat. He never eats with us; the brahmachari serves him in his cottage. Anyway, he only has a little fruit with a glass of hot milk at night. I always bow, touch his feet, and say "Good night, Swamiji."

"Right-o, Rajarajeshwari."

When he says this, I lift my eyebrows to demonstrate great doubt, because this is the name of a goddess.

"Yes, you are a queen in this world. You just don't know it, that's all."

December 20, 1990
Today I woke up with a slight headache. After a rest I still do not feel any better, so I opt to take my usual river walk and get some fresh air. Also I take a dose of Bryonia, one of my trusted homeopathic remedies. In ten minutes the pain has evaporated, this is the second time that I have had good results with Bryonia for a headache. Fortunately, it's still early enough that not many people are out yet. I walk the one-half kilometer down the river bed to the deep hole where I am sure to find fish to feed and a couple of kingfishers to admire.

However, I have some trepidation about entering the river bed with the knowledge of the impending release of water. Logically, if a big inundation is coming, it will only be released at night because it is not possible to alert all of the rural villagers. But action in India often defies logic.

I recall when I was in the Himalayas in 1978, there had been a terrible flood, which was caused by the Indian equivalent of the Army Corps of Engineers. Upstream from Uttarkasi, there had been a big log jam across the *Ganga* (for some reason the British preferred to mispronounce it "Ganges") from trees that had fallen in a harsh winter storm. The debris was so great that a lake had formed and was threatening to spread out and flood several near-by villages. The engineers rushed in with as much dynamite as they could carry, put it in the middle of the dam of timbers, and set the charge. For miles downstream everything within ten to twenty yards on each side of the banks was leveled, if not by the force of water, by the huge trees and debris it carried. The greatest losses were to the *sadhus* who build their huts along the banks of the holy river. If there were any human casualties, they went unreported; no one collects this type of data in India. It was all Mother Ganga's will. Long live the holy Ganga!

This morning the Kauveri remains in her usual dry state. The newspapers said tomorrow, but considering the Hindi languages uses the same word, *kal,* for tomorrow and yesterday; these notices must be subject to indefinable law. When I return to the *ashram*, I wash up and greet the Sadhu. Every morning our dialogue is exactly the same.

"*Namaste*, good morning, Swamiji."

"Good morning, my darling daughter, are you well with yourself?"

"Yes, Swamiji, I am well."

"Need anything, any food, supplies?"

"No, Swamiji, I need nothing."

"Go have your breakfast. You need to eat too."

Once when I was leaving, I turned and grinned back at him: “Only one need: eternal peace.”

At 3:00 p.m. as I am going over to hang my *sari* on the clothes line, I hear an unusual splashing sound. Looking out over the fence, I see an eagle standing in the river, bathing in a shallow pool of water. Interestingly, it is only some ten feet from a man taking his bath, and both appear to be unnoticed and unconcerned by the other. Then a pair of eagles swoop in to join the first, but stand at the edge of the water. At that moment, a couple of young boys come running by, totally oblivious to the birds. The three circle up and around to alight a little farther downstream to continue their ablutions. Again, within moments, a couple of dogs come running by.

Although the dogs pay no attention to the eagles, the birds are alerted and rise, circle, and find a new bathing spot. What a sight to see them pulsating those giant wings, then enjoying themselves as they dip and shimmy in the water. As soon as one finishes, it flies to a nearby tree, and another enters the deeper water for bathing. I do not see two of them bathing at the same time. They appear to wait in line, perhaps to serve as lookouts.

December 21, 1990
The river still has not filled up, but I stroll the dry bed with confidence as the sand trucks are back today. I am glad I have known the river in this form, a couple of silver streaks winding through the sand, easily available to man and beast. And it is ever-changing, but not necessarily of its own volition. The dump trucks, brightly painted in turquoise, yellow and red, daily carry away loads of sand leaving pits that modify and remold the two main streams and the secondary channels. As a result, each day a branch dries up or another branch breaks through between the two channels. Sometimes small boys build a dam to make a small pool, but the sand seldom holds the stream back for long.

I have a slight headache again today, so I go for a slow stroll through the trees and shrubs of the bamboo forest on the west side of the *ashram*. I think of Adam walking in the garden of Eden; the responsibility that humans have to protect the beautiful creations of the plant world. I wonder what the actual Hebrew word is for “dominion.” Man has “dominion over” the plant and animal kingdom, soon expanded to man over man. Is that where it began: in Genesis with the term “dominion over,” rather than “responsibility for”? Or did man write Genesis to suit his own nature?

All the creation is a manifestation of the incredible diversity of the One Supreme. Was *The Fall* just having the capacity to divide the diversity between good and bad? If so, the ability to drop this acquired skill must be a key.

A new guest arrived in the garden this morning; a rust-colored bird with a black-tufted head and white breast. While watching it, my eye wanders over to a white flower on a vine that runs along the *ashram* fence that turns out to be some type of wild squash. When I look up, I spot a golden-backed woodpecker, not seven feet away. He has not spotted me, as he goes hopping and pecking, hopping and pecking, up and down a branch. His feathers are ruffled and scruffy, definitely contributing to its appearance as an old world bird.

December 22, 1990
I had not thought it possible, but the river can no longer be called a river. The flow has been completely cut off by the tracks of the sand trucks leaving long, isolated fingers of motionless water. The water level is so low today that the buffaloes have to sit down for enough water to get any relief from the heat. But I do find some minnows to give my leftover rice. They are playing about in a small pool only a foot deep. In that pool I spot something else of interest: a small red clay pot—six inches across—stuffed with a piece of folded banana leaf. I squat down to observe the layout carefully. Around this pot are a dozen of its miniature—one and one-half inches across—each pot stuffed with a pan leaf. Uncooked rice, inedible to the fish, is also scattered around.

Later, I ask *brahmachari* what the offering I saw in the river signified. As I suspected, it is the ritual for

the ancestors, performed on their death anniversary. They believe that ancestors partake of the offered food. I have noticed in the city newspapers, even in Bombay, that the death anniversary has been modified from a trip to the river to a notice in the newspaper with a photo, name of deceased, and date of death.

“She doesn’t miss anything, does she?” the *brahmachari* commented to Ram Sadhu.

December 23, 1990
I overslept for the first time today, how seriously I do not know because my watch has decided to become an instrument for stopping time. I assume it is trying to help me reach the timeless state. However, we now have temple music that starts blaring promptly at 4:30 a.m., so I doubt I slept too long with that noise. This blasting of loud music from the temple just began two days ago, for this is the month of the *devas—Margari*—the most auspicious month of the year, primarily celebrated in the south. For forty-five days everyone in Tamil Nadu lives the life of *sannyasa,* abstaining from sex and meat-eating.

This season is particularly associated with a pilgrimage to the Ayyapa temple. A goal of every man in the South is to visit this temple once in his lifetime. The men all don a black *dhoti* for their first trip. After completion of the Ayyapa pilgrimage, the following years, the men can wear either orange or blue *dhotis.* So in late December and January, hundreds of orange-clad pseudo-*sannyasis* are rickshaw drivers, office clerks, and the banana-stall attendants. I was told that even the Moslems become vegetarians. Therefore, the price of vegetables skyrockets, especially since it is the rainy season and the principal vegetables of tomato, eggplant and okra, which all need the hot sun, are not growing well. In addition to the austerities, special rituals are performed in the home and everyone goes to the local temple daily. The boys in the orphanage are rising earlier than usual to be able to parade around the temple singing *bhajans* before their morning prayer service. The music via the loudspeaker is not conducive to meditation, so I decide to forego the attempt and catch up with my journal writing.

After breakfast, as usual I sit in the garden reading and watching the tree with tiny fragrant trumpet flowers. The yellow flowers are so small and insignificant that only the nectar suckers and I appreciate them. I hear a chirp, “Look, look, look at me” and raise my eyes to see a tiny black bird stretch his wings to pivot slightly to show me the bright iridescent blue patch on his shoulders and back. His long curved bill fits easily into the small tube of a flower. The other two nectar suckers that frequent the flowers are yellow breasted. They seldom make a sound, but the bobbing of the flowering branches indicates their presence.

Today the river is down another foot. Only a pair of eagles come to bathe. After standing and hopping, standing and hopping, they only find eagle-knee-deep water. Finally, they give up and fly upstream, seeking better possibilities for a cool-down. The black and white kingfishers are out in full force. Kerplunk. Kerplunk. They are having good luck and only have to hang in the air for a few seconds to spot their prey. Whereas earlier I have seen them hover for at least sixty seconds at a time. What skill they flaunt as they bend their body into a forty-five degree angle, spin their wings, and dive straight into the water, disappearing completely, then emerging with a silver sliver in their bills.

My patroness, that is, the owner of the cottage I am staying in, arrived today. A widow of ten years, she is petite and vital, a typical Tamil woman. Even though she is going to spend the night, she insists that I not move out of her cottage. She says she can simply sleep in another place, probably on a straw mat on the kitchen floor. Another example of Indian hospitality that is not to be equaled in all the world. They believe that a guest is god, and act accordingly. She spends a lot of time talking to Ram Sadhu, in Tamil, so I did not even get a drift of the theme. Also she finds some time to help in the kitchen. When returning from washing my dishes, I meet the Sadhu coming up the path.

“*Aaka,*” he calls out to me, which means “elder sister” in Tamil and is a definitely a term of respect connoting the wisdom of an elder.

“*Tatta,*” I return his greeting. He gets a good laugh over my reply, as I surprise him with my knowledge of the Tamil word for “Grandfather,” also a term of respect. You see the Indians consider it disrespectful to call anyone by their given names. So there is a title of respect for everyone: *tambi,* younger brother;

anna, elder brother, etc. You may have noticed that I never call Ram Sadhu by his name. Although he is not a *swami*, we all call him "Swamiji" as a term of respect, since he really lives the life of a renunciate, or *sannyasi.*

A great example of this custom of respect appears in the *Ramayana*. During their wanderings, Rama, Lakshana and Sita visit a small rural village. The women are serving the three guests equally, not wanting to favor anyone, even the Lord Rama. However, when they get the first opportunity, they take Sita aside and ask, "Which one is Rama?" Sita cannot point to her husband (pointing must be considered rude everywhere) and she has never dared utter his name. "My husband is the dark-skinned one," she replies, thus remaining in the confines of respect.

The most universal way, although more common in the North, to entitle someone is to add the Hindu suffix *"ji"* to the name, so I am usually called "Nancyji." Since I am the only female here, I am most often referred to as "she." You may also note that Ram Sadhu has never called me by my name, but "daughter," or sometimes "*aaka*" elder sister. Tonight, "*Tatta*" presses a little packet of candy into my palm.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Gifts for the Heart

I was up before the usual 4:00 a.m. this morning. It is not as difficult as it seems because sometimes I am asleep by 9:00 p.m. Besides, I am sleeping on a bed of a hard plank board without a mattress. I awaken almost every hour to change sides as my hip bones are feeling bruised. I made the mistake of leaving my thinsulate pad in Bangalore; one that I will not repeat. The quiet of the night settles early here. However, one bird awakens occasionally during the night to squawk, chatter and complain about something; then it settles back into silence. I suspect it's a myna; they have such a wide range of voice possibilities. Since I am up early, I quickly scurry about with washing my face, drinking a cup of hot tea, and straightening my bed. So I will have 15 or 20 minutes for meditation before the blasting of the loudspeaker begins.

The blaring always starts on schedule. Indians are never on time for anything, but that music commences at 4:30 a.m. rain or shine. I would sure like to tell the person who invented the loudspeaker a thing or two. So when the blasting starts, I stop my attempt at meeting the Divine through meditation and start reading the *Ramayana*, out loud to help my concentration. Last night the Sadhu delivered a thick, English translation to my door just before I retired.

After breakfast, I go by the Sadhu's cottage to check the only calendar to be sure of the date.

"It's the 24th. Tomorrow is Christmas," I mention to him.

"Yes, do you need anything special, it being Christ's birthday?"

"No. Christmas is a festival of materialism for us, not anything spiritual. I am glad to be away from that madness. Although I realize how great Christ and his teachings were, I'm not interested in Christianity as a religion, or in any religion for that matter. However, the Christians are too narrow-minded for me."

"Don't concern yourself. Narrow-minded, not narrow-minded. It's all the same Life. Let them be; you just be at peace. That's all I want of you: *shanti, shanti*."

"Yes, you are certainly right. I do not want to be narrow-minded about narrow-mindedness."

The phoebe-like birds have come to my porch in their daily scavenging for bugs and worms throughout the ashram grounds. Although they seldom sing, they have a lovely song that includes a distinctive trill at the end of each line. A durango also visited us today. He is solid black with a long tail split into two forks. I have often seen him quietly sitting on a high wire, but today he was swooping and dipping after bugs. Later I see him taking a ride on the back of a black goat. I am amused because he has always seemed such a loner before.

Since it is Christmas Eve, I want be quiet. In early evening, I pick a dry spot and sit on the sand to watch the sunset. The monsoon with its puffy clouds produces the loveliest of sunsets. Broad streaks of gray strata along the horizon reflect the rays of the sun up to the higher cumulus clouds to color them with orange and gold. A fat crescent moon hangs overhead and a stray wisp of a cloud, bright pink, floats by it. I watch the evening star disappear behind a gray streak, then reappear, then disappear and reappear again. Slowly the moon fades into the murky dusk above the horizon. I lie back in the sand and watch the moon through the fringed arms of the palm trees that fan the settling darkness. And I wait. Yes, there

they are. Tiny lights that glow and fade, glow and fade and glow. Fireflies at Christmas time.

December 25, 1990
Christmas morning dawns foggy and chilly. I complete my daily reading of the *Ramayana* with extreme joy; it is so incredibly beautiful. The Indians say that the *Ramayana* not only portrays the divinity of all life, it also extols the nobility of life. I am half-finished with my morning yoga routine when there is a knock at the door. The *brahmachari* peeps his head in the door and tells me, “Annaji has suggested that you come over for the morning prayers and lighting of the lamp, since it is Christmas.”

“When?”

“In five minutes.”

I quickly wrap myself in a clean *sari* and walk the short distance to the school prayer room. As I take my seat on the square of carpet placed for me, I smile, for the shrines are decorated with tiny twinkling lights. Seeing them puts me in a cheerful mood, for I love Christmas lights. The boys sing their morning prayers, then I give each an orange and apple—Santa in India, or something like that. I had arranged for the fruit and a special meal in honor of my mother, since she has a Christmas birthday. Sitting there, I recall, although it is 7:00 a.m. on Christmas morning here, it will be 7:00 p.m. Christmas Eve in U.S. I shutter at the thought of the Christmas Eve madness that I have experienced in the past. I have been totally guilty too. I love giving gifts, decorating and cooking for Christmas. However, if we Christians put as much time, thought and energy into the preparation for Christ’s birth in our hearts, as we do on gifts and food, the world would certainly be a different place today.

A new bird arrived in the garden today, as large as the koel. A large member of the cuckoo family; it is black, brown and white with a long tail with a broad stripe of white. I have never seen this bird before and am trilled to see it in flight with its tail pointed like an arrow. It heads for the *neem* tree whose berries must be his main interest, but the tiny fruit is nearly finished. The smaller phoebe-like birds are singing merrily today. Are they happy at having a cool, shady day, or do they know it is Christmas?

After supper I am floating peacefully through the garden when I encounter the Sadhu. “No stars tonight, Swamiji. But there is a big fire up the river. The sky is glowing with pink smoke in that direction,”I express my concern.

He turns and looks, “They are firing bricks.”

“Firing bricks? Yes, of course.”How often have I seen the pyramids of the ancient brick-making method in progress, but never the actual firing.

December 26, 1990
Yesterday the Sadhu suggested that I start *pranayama,* or breathing exercises. After class today he asks me to make a chart of my *pranayama* practice; how many rounds and how long it takes. He has already recommended that I try for twelve rounds at each sitting.

“You should do it 48 times a day.”

“But 12 times the three hours means 36 total.”

He does not reply. I decide that since twelve is still a bit of a strain for me that I will continue to do twelve for a couple of days. Then I can add one cycle each day until I reach the higher number.

As far as I can tell the water has still not been released upstream, although one narrow channel is winding through the sand. I think it must be from a bit of rain somewhere north of here. The buffaloes have to be satisfied with wetting their hooves and taking a drink, as water is too low for a buffalo bath. I wonder where the villagers are bathing and doing their laundry. The bamboo poles holding lines of billowing clothes are still visible downstream, so the *dobhi* continues his trade. The river is so quiet that I can actually hear the slap of the clothes on the rocks.

For my evening walk, I cross the non-existent river to the other shore and start down the closest path, which passes the crematorium shed. I am half way up the stone stairs before I am aware that there is smoke coming from it. The red crepe paper poppies and colored streamers strewn about give evidence of a recent procession, which strangely I had not heard. Usually, there are loud drums to warn one and all of the potential pollution. Once when I was in Chidambaram, a bier (the usual two bamboo poles supporting the body, which was wrapped in white cotton cloth) was approaching me. One of the two priests clapped his hands vigorously when he saw me. A warning to me of the polluting corpse. . . or vice versa?

To the Hindu pollution is not physical. It has nothing to do with human excrement in the rivers they drink out of, the open sewers that run by their homes, the mounds of human poop along the roadway. Pollution is a vibrational thing—the touch of an uncouth person, the shadow of a toilet cleaner, food cooked by the impure person or a menstruating woman—but the presence of a dead body is the worst pollution of all. Yes, cremators are definitely untouchables, but some have managed to take advantage of their position for some economic leverage.

At the top of the rung of this untouchable community—all castes have strict and complicated hierarchies—is the Benares clan. Tradition has it that if you die in the holy city of Benares you will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death. No matter your past errors, they are rendered null and void. So there are a lot of Hindus migrating to retire in Benares, making a booming business for the *Doms*—the undertakers there. First, the cost of wood for the cremation is high; they can, and do, charge a premium. One cannot start a funeral pyre with any old match, so the service of providing the fire brand from the perpetual flame calls for an another fee. If the family of the deceased is wealthy, additional gifts are extracted. The head honcho, called the *Dom Raja*— (Recognize the word *raja*, “king”?), negotiates all the accounts. He is reputed to be the wealthiest man in all of Benares. Typical of caste hierarchy, his position is inherited, not elected or bought.

So here I am in the midst of polluting smoke from the local crematory, which is not exactly pleasant for me either. An Indian would have avoided the polluting smoke at all costs, but holding my breath, I scurry past the structure. Not without taking mental notes: the pyre is a small, a tidy heap with the outside totally covered with round cow-dung cakes, placed around it in an orderly fashion. A neat pile of them sits nearby, ready for service though no caretaker is visible. When I do have to take a small breath, I am astonished to find that I only smell grilled steak. Can you believe it? A funeral pyre only smells like the neighbors barbecuing in their back yard.

Leisurely, I walk past green fields of waving rice. A row of women are weeding the plants. Work-ing across a row together, they move in unison. Their colorful *saris* of red, orange and green billow in the stiff breeze. These rustics are crazy about the colorful nylon and polyester *saris*. One cannot blame them for wanting a *sari* that is easy to wash and dry. However, on a typical tropical day in south India, it’s like being in a steam cabinet. Yes, I am speaking from personal experience. I almost had to disrobe in the middle of the street once when I borrowed one of Usha’s nylon saris in a pinch during the monsoon season.

I purposely walk past the spot where I had seen the lovely green pin-tailed birds dust-bathing one evening. Lined up on high wires, they are here again today. They show off with an occasional pivot, flourished with a swirl as they catch a passing insect. I have never seen these bee-eaters so near civilization before; they like the open fields. Here they seem to have happily adapted to modern man’s inventions. Afterwards I go by the Banyan tree temple. I place a purple flower and a coin in the *Kali* Shrine—we all must bow to Mother Time—sooner or later.



Banyan tree temple with priest

Taking deep breath, I pause a moment in this most ancient of temples; humankind's first temples, even in Europe, were under a wonderful tree. I breathe in the beauty of the overhead boughs draped with green leaves. As per the dictates of custom, several Neem trees are also are growing here, but they have remained small in the shade of the large Banyan tree. The marriage of these two varieties of trees is supposed to produce the vibrational environment for the granting of desired progeny. Yes, they are still praying for babies here in India. Black granite stones, each carved with a caduceus, the serpent symbol of vital life, are placed under these trees by couples in a ritual to beget children. The serpent in India has not received the bad press that is has in the West via the Hebraic scriptures. Here it is considered a positive omen—*it's LIFE*.

In the evening the Sadhu sits in the kitchen during supper. After I have finished eating, he asks if I am doing the *pranayama*.

"Yes, I'm doing it."

"That's 36 times, but you must do 48."

Just as I open my mouth to explain I plan to gradually increase the number, he continues, "There is another time, you know."

"What time?" I am puzzled.

"Oh, yes. At twelve midnight. It is the best time."

"It may be the best time, but it is not my best time. If I am going to get up early, I have to sleep early. I can't possibly stay up until midnight."

"Let it be. You do as you can. It's my duty to tell you these things; that is all I can do."

“Well, I usually wake up around 1:00 a.m.; I could do the *pranayama* then.”

“*Sary* [*okay* in Tamil], you do that. I know you are getting up early.” He turns to the *brahmachari,* “She gets up at 4:00 a.m. I’ve watched the light go on in her room.”

“You don’t know what a miracle that is—my getting up at 4:00 a.m. and without an alarm clock. I’m used to waking up a 7:00 a.m. every day in Pondy.”

“Here we do nothing but *sadhana*. That’s why we are here. We have no interest or concern with the material world.”

“The old buffalo is being pretty cooperative up to now. I don’t want to overwhelm the old fellow,” I comment with a smile as I pat the hip of my body.

“Rama, Rama. Who has sent me this daughter?” the Sadhu mutters as he exits into the dark night.

December 28, 1990

I set out for a morning walk through the sand bottoms where once a river flowed, for the trickle that appeared yesterday is gone today. I pass the small pool of the pots left from the ceremony for the ancestors. Every time I pass this way I eyeball the cute little miniature clay pots. They look so common, but try to find them in the marketplace. For the sake of the ancestors, I resist pilfering one. The lack of flow has left the water limpid and clear and the largest pot has overturned, so I can see additional details. The large pot was sitting on a flat, gray stone with a red cloth underneath and was full of rice. I can also discern that some of the small pots contained mango leaves, instead of *paan* leaves. When I go to wish the Sadhu good morning, he again asks about the *pranayama*.

“It’s going fine. I did do one cycle when I woke up a 1:00 a.m., but I had difficulty getting back to sleep.”

“Sleep. We don’t want to sleep; we must conquer sleep.”

I know this sleepless phenomenon of the Hindus is mentioned in several scriptures. Even in the *Bhagavad Gita*, “the sleepless one” is one of the accolades that Lord Krishna gives to the hero, Arjuna. But to one who has claimed what she does best is sleep, the idea has not been given much consideration.

“If there’s no mind, who sleeps?” he continues.

“If there is not mind, then there’s no one to sleep.”

“Right-o.”

“So you never sleep?” I question him.

“I do rest the body. The body has to have food and rest, but I never sleep. I let my body rest until 1:00 a. m. I’ve been sitting in this chair since then—no sleep—and I’m totally fresh,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. “We must rid ourselves of laziness.”

“Oh, yes, Ms. Laziness. Well, I certainly know her. I can honestly say that I know that I know laziness.”

Surely, to some extent sleep is an escape and a forgetting. Is that why I am getting by easily with less sleep—nothing happening during the day to escape or forget?

It is one of those clear, bright spring days—yes, December is spring here—so bright and crisp that the mind naturally stands lucid and transparent, content with the world. The bulbul is declaring his presence in the garden with his melodious song. The rust, black and white bird has found a mate and they are fluttering and chirping in a nearby tree. The little black nectar sucker is back testing the tubular yellow blossoms that have just opened. As it turns out, these flowers are more difficult to sup from as

their clusters are on willowy branches not suitable for perching. The tiny sipper is forced to hover and spin his wings in midair to collect the nectar. The tiny black sunbird is accompanied by a plain two-toned gray one, who must be his mate. The iridescence spreads over his shoulders and head like a little jewel!

Today the eagles arrive early, at 11:00 a.m., to bathe. I suppose they feared there would be no water if they waited any later. At that time, a rural lady passes through the sandy by-way with her prized buffalo—a monstrous one with horns turned back along its neck and back, so long and heavy I am shocked that she can balance them while walking. Her young offspring tags after the both of them. The eagle plays it safe and lifts himself out of the water with a quick down-thrust of its wings. He swoops and careers at a low level along the river's course, then lands to take a third dip in the water.

In the evening, I discover a pond full of white water lilies close to the cremation shed. Nearby an eagle is perched in a palm tree. He does not fly away at my approach, but moves his head slightly up and down to let me know that he has noticed me. I return early the next morning to find him sitting on the same palm frond. It is early enough that no one is around to disturb my peace. Contentedly, I sit on my straw mat appreciating the lilies that are half opened, admiring two turquoise kingfishers on a nearby stubby reed, and enjoying the antics of a small water snake as he glides through the water.

Too soon, though, the local male genre begin arriving to dip their tails in the pond. Oh, dear, the first fellow is dipping right where I have been watching the snake. So this idyllic pond is a toilet too. I reconcile myself to the reality and never return. I eventually give up the plan to sit for a morning contemplation of nature as there is simply no good bird-watching spot that is not near the water, therefore, used as the local toilet. I occasionally pass that way on my evening walks, but I never see the eagle again.

December 27, 1990

When I go out at the first crack of dawn for my morning stroll, I am thrilled to see that the river has returned. The two narrow channels are now broad and indolent, so the flow is about the same as when I arrived. The sun begins to send shades of rose to announce its arrival. The water catches the color and robes the river with shades of orange for a royal start of the day. Only myself and an errant bat, winging its way to its daytime hideout, are present to admire it.

As usual at 9:00 a.m., I go out to the garden bench with a book to partake of sun rays and birds' songs. Every day I like to practice consciously being grateful for being here in this beautiful environment. Ram Sadhu is usually sitting nearby on the bench by his cottage.

"One can get so many books, but you must read only those written by people of experience. That book, *Serpent Power*, written by. . . . Well, I can't recall his name."

"Woodruff? John Woodruff? He was actually an accomplished *yogi?*"

"Oh yes, he studied and practiced all these things and understood them from firsthand experience."

"I bought that book when I was here in 1979, but I never had time to even open it when I returned home. It remains packed in a box."

"Too bad. You would have learned a lot. You must awaken that serpent power that sleeps in the *mooladhara* [the root energy center]. That subtle force is like an electrical force. There are two levels of electricity: material and spiritual. The material level is the body. It is only electricity, vibration. After that serpent power awakens and pervades the body, every cell vibrates with sound. After that there is light—only light."

He pauses, then continues, "Don't your scriptures also say, 'If your eye be single, your whole body will be filled with light'? It's one and the same light, for ultimately there is only one light in creation."

"Is the sound like Om?"

"Not really; it's not like a sound you can vocalize. But you can say Om is a symbol for that primordial sound."

With a gleam in his eye, he wiggles his finger back and forth while moving it upward. "That's the power like the serpent that raises you to God."

"But in the Old Testament, it was the serpent that caused the downfall of man."

"That is another thing, not this at all."

I later wondered if the serpent of the garden was the crocodile in the Hindu system. It sits in the second chakra that represents the seat of passion—and power. Weren't Adam and Eve seeking power—the power to become as gods?

In the evening the water is even higher, too deep to wade across, leaving me stranded on the civilized side of the river for my walks.

"Ah, the river has at last become a river, Swamiji."

"Yes, it is coming. They empty that dam into three separate rivers, so we don't know when we will get our ration. It will soon fill up to the steps."

After a short walk in the bamboo grove, I return to the sandy beach to sit and watch the sunset. The sunsets in the South are slow and languid, especially compared to the sun's quick exit in the mountains of the North. The long, broad strokes of bright rose remain brilliant for a long time, almost as if it had decided to become a permanent set on the world scene. Often, several phases of color spread across the westerm sky, but tonight the rose hue lasts, then, ever so imperceptibly, slowly deepens and darkens. A lone crow appears graceful as it wings its way to the woods for rest.

December 29, 1990

There is no sunrise this morning as dark gray clouds hang in the East. Only a faint color reflects in the clear band on the western horizon. Since we are about fifty miles inland, we only catch the edge of the monsoon that travels up the east coast. I bet Usha is getting inundated in Pondicherry. In the early days of the rainy season in November, the storms are so massive this distance makes little difference, but they taper off by late December.

I put on a sweater to sit out on my bench for reading and thinking. Caught up with life, we never have time to question the mystery of the world with its immensity of implications. In our fixed track from home to the office, from the refrigerator to the TV, who takes time to explore the marvels of nature—the melodious song hidden in a bird's egg, the fluttering of jeweled wings concealed in a fuzzy caterpillar, the spreading oak tucked in a tiny acorn?

Who indeed can understand these unfathomable secrets of nature? We even ignore and never wonder at the mysteries we carry within. How did we know how to build this physical body—by what intelligence? And our dream selves, where do we get the eyes, ears and mouth to see, hear and speak in our dreams? How do we make the sounds that we hear, the images that we see? While dreaming, we are the set artist, the actor on the stage and writer and director—all in one. Surely, contemplating these things should be sufficient to cause us to appreciate and wonder daily at the mystery that we are.

Ram Sadhu walks over to the gate, opens it, and stands watching the river. After some minutes, he speaks to the boys playing in the sand. They have ten days' vacation after exams, but most of the boys from the orphanage remain here, having no home to return to. Although most of them do have one parent alive, the parent will be living in the streets. Even though I never understand a word, it is always a

joy to see the Sadhu talking with them. He speaks so sweetly and lovingly, showing genuine interest in them.

I remain on the bench reading when out of the corner of my eye I catch the orange of Ram Sadhu's clothes rounding the corner going back to his cottage. At that moment, a bulbul breaks into song. A wave of sweet peace arises from I know not where. My eyes close in sweet contentment. This world and this Sadhu are amazing. What wonder I experience as my mind spreads out to experience the joy of creation, the joy of the birds who chirp, the sun that gives light, the leaves that give shade, the flowers that give delight, the earth that gives support, the breeze that cools and caresses my skin.

When it becomes too hot, I go to my room to write in my journal. Afterwards, to stretch my legs and breathe some fresh air, I walk outside to check to see if the river is still rising. I walk down the stairs and across the sandy beach to its edge. Calmly I stand watching the widening expanse of water running to the sea. The sight tells me something about the combination of the flow and foundation of life. The masters say that *shakti* (energy, power) can be drawn into the body from different sources such as the sun, water, fire, lightning, air and ether. I would also add, especially flowing water. In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, several monks were enlightened while watching the flow of a river, so I am not the only one who thinks so.

A pool is forming in the hole that the boys have hollowed out the last few days—bucket by bucket—carrying sand to their playground. This morning they dug a canal from the hole to the river so that it would fill up with water. I turn to return to the ashram and catch a flash of orange turn from the fence. The Sadhu was watching me. I had suspected so before, but this is the first time I actually caught him. When I climb the steps, he is stooped over his flowers with his back to me. As I reach my porch, I realize that again I am experiencing a wave of indescribable peace. It feels as the cells of my body are waking to a wonderful aliveness. It is kind of like the feeling of anxiety, but that feeling is hot and oppressive, whereas this feeling is cool and comfortable. So the Sadhu may be getting through my thick hide after all.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The Sadhu

It drizzled all night last night, but cleared with the early rays of the sun. I approach the beach cautiously as there are five or six stray dogs lying on the sand. As usual, they don't seem to notice me. Little wonder, they must be tired from barking for hours last night. The rising sun is obscured by one huge cumulus cloud that looks like a giant rooster striding across the sky. Its comb, beak and tip of the raised wing are back-lit with golden pink. A large column of darker pink reflects in the rippling river, now in full flow, from bank to bank. The ripples magnify and play with the bright color, outlined by dark gray on one side and by clear pale blue on the other.

"Good morning, Swamiji. The river is flowing; the sun is shining; the birds are singing; that is all."

He gleefully chants a verse by the Vedantic sage and poet, Ram Tirtha:

> I will tell you my supreme vocation,
> Before me there was no creation
> It was I who raised the sun out of the sea.

At least every other day, I go to the cottage of Siva RamaKrisna to discuss the *Ramanaya*. Our conversations are always informative, but the most interesting part is when he talks about Ram Sadhu's past. He told me that the principal benefactor of the ashram and school was a Jain merchant. Years ago, his young son fell into the river and was being carried away. The few bystanders were helpless, for Indians do not know how to swim. Ram Sadhu happened to be just downstream from the commotion. Seeing the boy floating by, he jumped in the water and saved him. The father showed his gratitude by contributing generously to the charitable institutions here.

Siva RamaKrisna also told me that Ram Sadhu was quite an expert in herbal healing. In fact, when he came to Kumbakonam, he began to prepare his herbs for the local people. Of course, more and more people came for his medicines. Originally, he had come to this area with a *guru*, who returned a year later to behold his student totally immersed in making medicines for everyone.

"I left you here to do *sadhana*. You could have stayed at home in Lahore if you were going to do this work," his *Guru* admonished him.

Ram Sadhu got the message and threw all of his pots for herbal preparations into the river. However, he does do one "work", as he refers to it. Every morning after the boys put out fresh flowers on the altar at the school, they bring him all the old ones. The Sadhu spreads them out on a couple of burlap bags, turning them several times during the day to make sure they dry out well. Then, just at dusk, peak mosquito time here, the *brahmachari* brings some coals from the kitchen in a small cast-iron brazier. The Sadhu sprinkles the dried flowers over the coals, producing a thick black smoke—a natural mosquito repellent.



Ram Sadu on his usual bench

Once when it was sprinkling, I put the burlap bags under the benches, so the flowers would not get wet. The Sadhu saw me from his open-air room and called to me, “You leave those alone. That is my work.”

“I am just putting them out of the rain. It’s sprinkling.”

“Oh, that’s okay then,” he replied.

Today while he is fussing with the flowers, I pick up a handful of *neem* berries from my porch and take them over to ask him if they have some use.

“Yes, for medicine. They are one ingredient in the medicine I make for the children when they get a cold.”

He pauses to take them and examine them. “Where did you get them?”

“Right in my yard, the crows are eating some and knocking others down.”

He looks up and laughs at seeing the crows in the very top of the tree, clinging to the end of the branches where the tree forms its bitter fruit.

“Ah, look at them enjoying the Life.”

The chubby swami who has been my next-door neighbor left today to visit another ashram to help a sick friend. His name is Karunananda (bliss of compassion), but I call him Khanananda (bliss of food). This is the negative aspect of my sense of humor, criticizing this swami behind his back. However, I do refrain from sharing this label with others. It does seem that this swami’s chief interest is food. With plastic tote over his arm, he takes off to the market every day. When I pass his door before mealtime, I always hear the sound of grinding or chopping, as he is preparing chutney or condiments to spice up the bland food. Although he eats the ashram food, and plenty of it, he never eats with us. He picks up his filled plate in the kitchen and returns to his room, always taking his time to check carefully to be sure the *brahmachari* has served him every dish. He reprimands the brahmachari sharply if he thinks he has missed out on something.

Within a week of my arrival I knew that Swami Khanananda would be leaving soon. Therefore, I knew the time was limited that I had to listen to the noise from his radio, particularly the news in Hindi. There is so much static I wonder how he understands anything. Then there is the noise of his morning ablutions. He's up at 5:30 a.m. to start the day with those horrific hawking sounds that the Indians seem to think are necessary for their daily cleansing. One morning I saw Siva RamaKrishna from across the garden; he was out by his cottage gagging away. Thinking he was ill, I grabbed the Nux Vomica remedy and went rushing over to rescue him. He told me that he was onlydoing his daily hawking routine. I'm still not sure, he looked awfully pale to me.

Swami Khanananda does not seem to fit into the ashram life, for he is always late for the afternoon class. It must be a terrible nuisance for him to have to listen to Ram Sadhu compliment my ability to sit for an hour on the floor without moving, as he seems to be unable to sit still for even five minutes. The possibility also exists that he does not want a woman in the ashram, for he has never spoken to me once. This attitude is a bitter pill for most, particularly European, women. They take it as an insult that women have to be covered from head to toe, while men runabout in a simple loin cloth—even nude. This behavior is based on the belief that the men will easily be tempted by the sight of a woman's flesh, whereas women are above such wanton desire.

Sunday always brings visitors from town. A priest comes to give a discourse on the *Bhagavad Gita* in Tamil. Since I understand nothing, I use the time to meditate, although it is difficult as the priest speaks in a loud sing-song voice. One regular Sunday visitor is Mr. Guruswami, a retired engineer. He is a very kind person and always interviews me: Anything you need? Things going well? How about the food? How long will you stay? When are you leaving for Pondicherry?

Then he flies over to the Sadhu's cottage; I suppose to give him a report. In any case, during the interrogations, I am able to gleam tidbits of information on India's culture. He told me that he figured out what my name means: *nan* is the "I" and "my" thought, that is, the ego; *si* means "discordant." So my name in Tamil translates to mean: "the one discordant, or dissatisfied with, the ego."

This morning he asks me to give him some insights of the point of view of "you people" in regard to several religious ideas, like "Why are we born?" and "What is the meaning of life?"

"Well, I think you know that Christians do not believe there is any meaning to life itself. When a human is born, it is a random happening, entirely of biological origins."

"That could not be so. Because I have heard the Christians speak of eternal life."

"But when they speak of eternal life, they only mean life continues after death, not that it existed before birth."

"But how can something be eternal that did not already exist before birth, it is a contradiction in logic. Don't they think. . . ."

"No, they do not think," I cut him short. "Christianity is a religion of faith, not logic. That's why so many Eurpopeans and Americans come to India."

"But faith in what? Faith in your innate divinity?"

"Well, certainly, Christ did speak of our divinity, but that is not the basis of faith. The words of Christ are the basis of faith, but not those particular words that speak of our innate divinity, for the Christians are more interested in our innate condition of sin. Really, it's not that easy to explain." I pause a moment, then make another attempt. "Since we are born in sin, the purpose of life is to be saved from our sinful state. So the purpose of life is to be saved through Christ's intervention, but there is no meaning to life itself."

Mr. Guruswami remains speechless, so I continue: "As I see it, Hinduism has three essential things that Christianity lacks: First, a credible philosophy and logic to back up the religious practices. Second, in

India, in every generation, there has been a continual flow of God-realized saints to guide and inspire the populace. Third, among these saints, there have always been scholarly sages who have interpreted the scriptures according to their unique social conditions and time in history. So due to this continual renewal, the religion has remained viable.”

The utterances of these sages are treated with the same respect as those of the ancient sages because the wisdom is from the same fount, the *sanatana dharma,* the ‘eternal wisdom’ that is humanity’s birthright. The inspired Biblical writings ended in 30 AD, but the inspired writings never end in Bharata.

“How can a religion that says there is one teacher, and he has said it all, remain flexible and fresh? But we must not concern ourselves, the Christians, along with the Buddhists and Muslims, remain very happy believing they are the only ones who are going to heaven,” I finally finish my tirade.

He immediately interjects, “To heaven? We don’t want to go to heaven; heavenly pleasures are only a temporary stepping-stone to another life on earth. We enjoy there only as long as our *punya,* merit, lasts. Then when the *punya* is exhausted we have to return for another human birth until we have our final birth—when we realize our innate divinity.”

“Hummm. Well. . .” He’s sure got me stuttering now. “Let’s see. If heaven is only temporary, then hell might only be temporary too. Then how could the preachers scare people into heaven? You see they need us to believe there is only one life.”

“One life time per person?” he questions.

“Yes, one life time per person to do it all,” I reply.

“Hummm. That would be rather limiting, wouldn’t it.”

When Mr. Guruswami came today, he presented me with a *nimbu,* lime, to ward off evil spirits for the new year. He also gave me the addresses of two relatives in Pondicherry, should I need anything while I am there. He has known Ram Sadhu for many years and has started putting together a biography from information he has gleamed directly from Ram Sadhu and other devotees.

He is very talkative and is quite happy to fill me in with some details of Ram Sadhu’s life as Sundar Das. We are such creatures of curiosity to be intrigued by a sage’s personal history. As if “counting other people’s money” will benefit us. It is hard to believe, but Sundar Das served in the British military in World War I in Mesopotamia. That’s how he got his “right-o” jargon.

As his strapping 6' 2" body testifies, the future Sadhu was born in Punjab to a distinguished family of Jallian *Brahmans,* who had served as ministers to the kings in that area. The kings always gave land to those who served them, so the *Brahmans* lived a simple life with family property to support themselves. Their role in the society was to give spiritual, as well as practical, advice. In Punjab, they also excelled in herbal healing, Ayurveda, and were the only doctors in that area.

Although his earliest childhood was embellished with all his wishes fulfilled, Sundar Das received a blow early in life. For when he was eight years of age, his father died, leaving his young wife with three sons to support. We can assume they had cows for their own milk and grew enough wheat and vegetables for the maintenance of the household. But never fruits or vegetables to sell; for a *Brahman* is a *Brahman*, and a merchant is a merchant.

As her ancestors had done, Prema Mata, his mother, continued in the role of a healer. She would have helped pick and prepare the herbs for her father when she was a child, and later helped her husband in the same way, so she was already practiced in the healing arts. With this service, she made some extra income to purchase clothes, utensils and other necessary household items, including her sons’ education. Since there were no schools in that small village, she had to pay room and board, as well as tuition, in the nearest town. When the eldest brother finished his education, he left for Burma to make his fortune.

Sundar Das had started his education in a near-by Muslim school, where he mastered Urdu. To continue his education, he had to go to the county seat to attend a government school to the eighth standard, taught in Hindi. For high school, he enrolled in the English-medium Christian school that his two older brothers had attended. However, he had only completed the ninth standard when his second brother left for Burma, also to earn money. Sundar Das was then called home to help his mother with managing their farm and preparing of the herbs.

As in all villages across India, festivals were a highlight of the year. However, there was another common entertainment in the villages, that was reenacting the dramas of the epics, particularly, the *Ramanaya* in the North. There were troupes that traveled through the countryside, but each village also had its own local talent. The villagers never tired of seeing these local productions of their ancient heroes. Although Sundar Das eagerly participated in these dramas, he particularly liked playing the role of Hanuman, the hero-monkey who was Rama's most ardent devotee in the *Ramayana*. Having easily become an expert in boxing, wrestling and gymnastics during his one year at the Christian school, he trained the other village lads in these sports. They would also demonstrate their athletic feats in the village gatherings. So Sundar Das was living a quiet life in a quiet village when his brothers returned from Burma, deposited a fund in a bank account for the maintenance of their mother, and renounced life in the world. They both left for the Himalayas to take the *sannyasa* vows and were never heard from again—not even one letter to the family. Now that is a *pakkha* (perfect) *sannyasa*.

The young Sundar Das did not know what to do with himself, so he joined the British army when he was only seventeen. He ended up in the middle East as a clerk in a military hospital, along with over one million Indian troops who were shipped to Mesopotamia during World War I. I have never understood exactly why there were so many *Brahmans*, the priest and educator caste, in the British military. One obvious reason is the British were taking over their traditional role as educators and, in the North, doctors. In addition, the British were usurping the small kingdoms, so there were no longer kings to advise. Another reason is that the *Brahmans* were more educated than the general populace. Therefore, *Brahmans* were prevalent in all government services, especially since they had a proficiency for learning languages, which the British lacked. So these native clerks translated between the local populace and their British captors. After the war, Sundar Das returned to India and continued as a military clerk in Lahore.

While working in the big city, Lahore, Sundar Das became aware of the India Freedom Movement. World War I had brought some rude awakenings for the Indians. The Indians, even Gandhi, had been duped into thinking that if they helped the British in the war, Britain would consider them worthy of independence—at least, dominion status. I have not been able to find total numbers, only references here and there. Some 17,000 who were captured by Rommel in North Africa were distributed in prison camps in Germany. An additional 29,000 Indian troops were sent to guard the Suez Canal that had been commandeered by the Europeans. One contingent of 12,000 Indians was devastated due to lack of supplies and ammunition. Interesting to note, the British Government had sent T.E. Lawrence, the man they considered most capable of negotiating with the Turks, to Baghdad to attempt to gain the Indian army's freedom, but to no avail. The incident of leaving these men stranded to die was considered of such gravity that the British Secretary of State of India (in London) resigned.

In those early days, V.D. Savarkar, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Aurobindo Ghosh led the freedom movement. They moved around in the North, definitely the most politically active area. Sunder Das served as a body guard to the speakers at several rallies. When he witnessed the devastation in the Jalianwala Bagh Massacre in April of 1919, he was more determined than ever that Indians should be freed from these "civilized" oppressors.

Another important influence emerged during those years. In 1918, Sundar Das met his first spiritual *guru*, Swami Anamananda. We tend to picture monks living in remote caves, but in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, many authentic holy men often visited towns where there were many pious householders. Staying only a few days in any one home, they gave practical suggestions about any problems facing the family, as well as spiritual guidance. Perhaps, one motive was to look for potential

students. Swami Anamananda must have seen in Sundar Das a bright, intelligent, inquisitive, healthy young man, who had the qualifications for a spiritual student worthy of his time and attention. They had long private discussions. I sometimes wonder if some of Ram Sadhu's words to me now are the same words that his *Guru* told him so long ago.

Prema Mata was watching the political and spiritual activities of her son and was concerned, especially when he was imprisoned twice. She saw only one solution: tie him down in marriage. And that is what she did. He did not have the right, or the conscience, to say "no" to his mother. She had already lost two sons to the spiritual *ashrama;* she needed a daughter-in-law to help her in the household and care for her in her old age. Returning to his childhood village, at the age of 22, Sundar Das was married to Amrith Kaur, only 15 years of age. In the following five years, they had three lovely daughters and lived a simple life with no wants, nor luxuries.

Sundar Das continued living the life of a normal *Brahman* householder, maintaining his family and serving the community in whatever way that he could. However, an unfortunate incident occurred that caused him to totally re-evaluate his life.

It happened that one of his neighbors was a goldsmith. Somehow a gold ring turned up missing at his shop. The goldsmith accused Sundar Das of taking the ring. Sundar Das had been taught from a young age to tell the truth and he never deterred from that training. When he denied taking the ring, he thought everyone would believe him. But the goldsmith kept harassing him and even accusing him publicly.

One day Sundar Das had had enough and shook the goldsmith up a bit. The village council levied a heavy fine against him because of the incident. The worst of it was that Prema Mata even doubted him and meted out the worst punishment possible for a Hindu son: she stopped speaking to him.
What kind of world is it that values a gold ring over the word of an honest man, he questioned? He seriously mulled over the situation and formed his own conclusion. "This world is not the place for an honest man, so it's not the place for me." One morning at daybreak, without informing his wife or mother, he left for the holy city of Haridwar to begin his life as a *sadhu.* He innately felt this calling for some years, yet he had been obligated to continue to take responsibility for his mother. Now that his mother and wife were financially stable, he thought the incident a sign that he should take the step to renounce the world.

. . . . .

When I return to my room after dinner, at about 8:30 p.m., I have a little time to read. Since everyone else goes to their rooms too, some nights I sit out on the cement bench alone in the dark. I have never had the opportunity to enjoy nighttime like I have here. Daytime is the manifestation of Life's activities; night is Life itself. I watch the stars, listen to the trees swaying, enjoy an occasional chirp of a cricket or croak of a frog, and savor a gentle breeze that surrounds me with wonderful fragrances of jasmine. It feels so good to be part of this enchantment, but I must go to rest. My light is always out by 10:00 p.m. at the latest, in preparation for my 4:00 a.m. arising.

Chapter Twenty-nine

The Brahman and the *Ramayana*

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As dawn's first light sends reflections along the river every morning, the *Brahman* makes his way to its waters to perform his daily ablutions and recitations, including the *Gayatri Mantra*. This *mantra* is an invocation to Savitri, the intelligence that enlivens the sun. The petitioner requests that this powerful intelligence guide him throughout the day.

> *Let us meditate on the most excellent*
> *Light of Savitri*
> *May he guide our intellect.*

Throughout Bharata's long history, all *Brahmans* have recited this short verse from the *Rg Veda* at the three principal times of the day: sunrise, noon, sunset. Seemingly, the tradition is rarely practiced in today's world, for the *Brahmans* are occupied reciting stock indexes on Wall Street and in Bombay stock exchange. However, in the awsome stretches of rural south India, the tradition remains viable.

Every morning and every evening, I have the pleasure of watching Shiva RamaKrishna make his way to the river with a big brass pot on his head, then hearing him recite his prayers. Afterwards, he returns with the pot, filled with holy water from the Kauveri River, back to his hut. Watching this trip back through the centuries gives me a very soothing and secure feeling, I feel grateful that some things never change.

The essential purpose of the *Vedas* is to insure the well-being of all aspects of the creation. While in a high intuitive state, the ancient *rshis* became aware of the subtle cosmic vibrations that had become denser, then intermingled into patterns, which we perceive with our sense organs as the various forms and objects of the material world.

Thus the Vedic *mantras* (verses) were intuited in a timeless state to be used in the realm of time. The actual chanting of the *mantras* is an important aspect of the protective and creative power of Vedas. The chanting assures the alignment of the physical world with the original creative vibrations, whereby humankind can live in harmony with his subtle origins. Therefore, a group of people, that is, the ones of subtle mind, began to chant the *mantras* and to perform the Vedic rites for the welfare of humanity.

Since the purpose of chanting the *mantras* is to create a harmony between the original sounds of creation and the invoker of the *mantra,* the correct innovation of words is necessary for the *mantras* to retain and manifest their innate power. This is the reason that the sages warn that a modification in the chanting of a Vedic *mantra* will produce no effect.

This same phenomenon exists even in our everyday world. When I, with my American accent, asked for the bus to Basavanagudi at the Bangalore bus station, all I got was "No English," from the official sitting at the information table. I think I am pronouncing an Indian word, but he thinks I am speaking English. It is only when a kind person, standing to the side, speaks up and repeats the word, *Basavanagudi*—just exactly like I thought I said it—that the face of the official lights up in recognition. Then he enthusiastically directs me to the correct bus.

The Gayatri is considered the most important of the Vedic *mantras,* as it is a prayer, an invocation and a

creative power, all in one. This *Mantra* specifically requests: "May my actions be in harmony with the highest intelligence," that is, the highest good. Its repetition the first thing in the morning tunes the mental attitude for the day to the station that brings forth one's best qualities. So our actions, which are often merely mechanical impulses from past experiences, begin to have some moments of conscious content.

A deity is associated with each *mantra*. The deity provides a symbol with which the mind collects positive ideas and inspirations. The *Gayatri Mantra* is addressed to Savitri. Savitri's name is from the Sanskrit root *Su* = to excite or stimulate; therefore, his name can be translated as: The stimulator of everything. He is not the physical sun, but a power because of which there is a sun. The *Gayatri Mantra* is concerned with humanity and the universe, plus the Unknown that sustains them.



Shiva RamaKrishna and his flower-covered hut

One afternoon, I go over for another long discussion with Shiva RamaKrishna. He is such an endless fountain of knowledge that I only go to his cottage every other day, or I would pass the whole day listening to and questioning him. He has translated the *Ramayana* by Tulasi Das into Tamil and has had it published through a trust to sell at the low price of 25 Rps. [$.80] for nine hundred pages. He has also translated it into English, but has been waiting for someone to check the English and give an opinion if it is worth publishing.

He relates to me that when he first saw me he was so happy; he felt that Rama himself surely had sent me here. This was news to me, as I had feared that the resident *sadhus* might consider a "foreign lady" an intrusion.

"Oh, no," he exclaimed, then explained that every letter that Gandhi wrote in English was first checked by Mirabhen, his English secretary, before it was released. I told him that I was helping with the editing of a spiritual magazine, so there was no reason I could not help him also.

"I don't want to put any burden on your head."

"No, I want to read the *Ramayana* anyway. Also, I have a knack for editing, so it will be no burden. That is, if there is no pressure of a deadline."

"Oh, no. It's been sitting in Madras for three years now, waiting for someone like you to come along."

Siva RamaKrishna had been a professor of English literature in a small university. His father had died when he was a teenager; therefore, for many years he was the sole support of his mother. I never asked, but assumed, this was the reason that he never married. A son who is responsible for the support of a widowed mother has a mark against him on the eligibility list for marriage. When she died and the necessary rituals were completed, Siva RamaKrishna resigned his job, gave up his home, and started living the life of a *sadhu.* He had lived in various ashrams until he discovered Ram Sadhu about ten years ago.

Since then, he has spent most of his time here in a small hut beside the master's. In addition, his interest in the *Ramayana* has taken him to Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama. While in that region, he became acquainted with the *Mahant* there. Unlike the Shankara *Mathas* whose heads are picked for scholarly and spiritual achievement, the position of the *Mahant* in the North is simply purchased; we will assume by one who has spiritual aspirations. Evidently the current *Mahant* was not particularly schooled in the scriptures because he was quite pleased to find a scholarly assistant like Siva RamaKrishna. He wanted the Brahman to remain in the North all year, but the Brahman protested that a south Indian cannot endure the winters of the North.

One day he tells me, "You know when I came here some ten years back, it was Ram Sadhu who came to me one day and placed a Tulasi *Ramayana* in my hand with the words.'This is to be your life work from this day,' he told me. Since that day I have been totally immersed and completely satisfied with its study. So you see how insightful these great ones like Ram Sadhu are."

The *Ramayana* is the history of an Incarnation—God born as man without any veil: his birth as the Prince Rama, his marriage, the loss of his kingdom, his separation from his wife, and the subsequent battle with the demons of the world to reunite with her. Filled with wisdom on the morals and ethics faced in the drama of human life, it is also interspersed with expositions of the highest eternal truth: We are Divine. In addition to Rama's and Sita's history, it is filled with the traditional stories of the Indian sages and kings. More than any other literary work, it represents the heartbeat of Bharatha. All castes and creeds, particularly in the North memorize this Tulasi version, rendered in poetry. Last year when the *Ramayana* was playing on national television, trains did not move until the one hour episode was over. Yes, train stations in the large towns have television screens dangling from the platform ceilings, but not in the waiting rooms.

One afternoon, Shiva RamaKrishna covers a portion of the *Ramayana* that includes material that Ram Sadhu acclaims is wonderful. He often interrupts the Brahman's commentary with comments, praising some thought, or even singing the verses, but he is more exuberant than usual today. His expressed joy is infectious. It makes one wonder how the world must look through his eyes.

Often I muse during my travels what it would be like to have a Hindu mindset. If I were to tell Ram Sadhu that I was born a sinner, doomed to hell, he would topple over in disbelief. I try to imagine what it would have been like to be raised with the conditioning, "I am a child of light." The Vedas state that only an inherent illusion keeps me from seeing this Truth. Due to this Ignorance, we become involved in the world and accumulate *mala,* or dirt, that covers our divinity, just as soot collected on a kerosene lamp glass obscures the light of the flame. So we have a simple task in life: remove the dirt, or simply realize the illusion, or impermanence, of the dirt. Even on a cloudy day, the sun is shining.

After class I ask Shiva Ramakrishna to show me in my English translation the particular passage that Ram Sadhu was revering today. I just love this edition of the *Ramayana*. It's a beautiful rendition translated by a British missionary, Dr. Atkins. Obviously inspired while accomplishing the arduous task, he actually used a poetic format in the meter of the original Tulasi Dasa version in Prakrit language. Just reading the words in English inspires an open, expanded consciousness. It's obvious that the work was a labor of love for Dr. Atkins.

He tells me the passage he covered today is from a conversation of Laksmana, Rama's brother, with

Guha, the ferryman who will take Laksmana across the river to meet his brother. Please note there is no copyright for this translation, in spite of the Western capitalist influence, most spiritual works are still not copyrighted in India. Thank god, these precious veins of the uniqueness of the Bharathis, "the children of light," still exist. Everything has not yet been swept away by "western civilization."But for how long?

The passage that Ram Sadhu was so excited about is so short that I want to reproduce Laksmana's words for you here:

> No man can give sorrow or joy to another,
> It's always the fruit of one's own actions, brother,
> Uniting, dividing, foul pleasers or fair,
> Evil, good, or indiff'rence—'tis delusions snare;
> Of life and of death the world's course is the reason,
> Of all gain and loss, of each fruit in its season;
>
> One's city and fam'ly, land, riches and home,
> Even life and death too, in the world's course must come,
> But listen and note and take heed in your soul—
> All these things are unreal, bring us not to our goal.
> Just as in their dreaming, kings may become beggars,
> And beggars may well become gods,
> But waking find no gain or loss, so to us
> Is this delusive life with its odds.
>
> So consider this well, and with anger have done;
> For these troubles put uselessly blame upon none,
> Here we are all asleep and we see many dreams,
> But because of illusion, real ev'ry one seems;
> In this night-like world those devoted ones waken
> Who, seeking the real, have all false things forsaken.
>
> Know this—Only then the soul wakens to morn,
> When it turns from all sensual pleasures with scorn
> When the soul wakens falsehood and error must flee;
> Then to Rama's blest feet one devoted can be;
> In thought, word and deed to his feet when devoted;
> The chief good of life is then ours, be it noted;
> For Rama is Brahma[n], of all good the essence,
> Eternal, unseen, filling all with his presence,
> Unequaled, above all division and change;
> Scriptures show Him to be far beyond our mind's range.
>
> For the sake of the faithful, mankind, *Brahmans,* cows
> And gods also, he's come in his kindness;
> He's taken man's form and assumed human ways;
> Hearing this, men are freed from their blindness.
> Understand this friend; leave behind dreams and deceit;
> Be devoted to Sita's and Raghubir's [Rama's] feet.

I sit out on the garden bench to read it aloud, so I can appreciate the meter of the poetry. In a short time, the Sadhu appears, so I mention that I have just read the words of Laksmana.

"Those words are so esteemed that they have been named the *Laksmana Gita* [song]."

"Oh! He expresses so beautifully that Rama is the presence in all. So Rama is what you have been calling

the Life.”

“The same. Rama is that very force, but he took an Incarnation, so that man may know about the Life. But don’t think you’ll figure it out; it’s beyond the intellect.”

Eventually, I get Shiva RamaKrishna to talk about himself more. He was a young boy during the India’s independence movement.

“You mentioned Gandhi. Did you know him personally?”

“No, I never met him. You see our leader here in the south was Rajagopalachari. Father wanted to join the *satyagraha* movement, but Rajaji told him true *satyagraha* was living the principles in one’s own home. We spun cotton for our own clothes, planted our vegetables, and lived as if we were in an *ashram* right in our own home.

“Rajaji was a great man; he does not get the credit he deserves. He did have his own ashram in Tiruchengode here in Tamil Nadu.”

“I know there was quite an outcry from the Tamilians when he was not included in the film, *Gandhi,*” I mention.

“Well, I know all these Indians with their difficult names are hard to keep up with, so it was probably a justifiable omission. Did you see the film?”

“Yes, it was quite good. Except for one point, which unfortunately occurred right at the beginning of the movie. When Gandhi was assassinated, he uttered two words, ‘He Ram.’ To a Hindu it is considered most auspicious to invoke the name of the Lord at the moment of death. However, when they translated it into English for the movie, they had him say, ‘Oh, God’ which sounded more like ‘Oh, no,’ so it distorted the meaning entirely.”

“That is most unfortunate. ‘Oh, God’ would not convey the true meaning at all,” he agreed.

I reply, “To me that one utterance, more than anything, proves his sainthood. Otherwise, it is rather hard for me to believe that he was a saint. To one who knows anything about his personal life, he is very controversial. How could the proponent of non-violence have been so dogmatic to his own children? Then there was his habit of living in luxurious homes of Indian millionaires, who clearly made their fortunes by exploition the poor. And his sexual hang-ups were just too blatant.”

“You must mean Gandhi’s experiments with sleeping with his niece? Not even the Indians approved. Patel told him he had to stop it, but Gandhi was a very stubborn man. In the end, Patel had to tell the niece to stop the experiment because it was harming Gandhi’s image. She obeyed Patel.”

“It seems to me that he even projected his sexual hang-ups on his own sons. After pumping out four children himself, he expected his sons to remain celibate. It’s inhuman that a father won’t let your own children make their own decisions on such essential matters as marriage and parenting. In fact, it is against the four *ashramas* of Hinduism,” I observe.

“You are right. He did not get the idea from the *rshis*. But neither is the idea of asceticism, accompanied with celibacy, foreign to our tradition. Certainly, he must have been influenced by guilt about his early sexual activity.”

“He was justified in resenting that his father forced him to marry at age thirteen. But his insatiable appetite at that age can hardly be blamed on his father. Anyway, why take it out on his sons?”

On second thought, I continue, “Of course, I know that he was not the only Indian revolutionary who was a tyrant over his family. Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim contingent of India, would not let his daughter marry a non-Muslim, although her mother was a Parsi. [Jinnah married back in the days when

religion did not count so much.] Nehru's father, Motilal Nehru annulled his daughter's marriage to a Muslim."

Since the Brahman remains silent, I interrupt the silence, "This authoritarian side of Gandhi is not brought out in his profiles. I'm surprised that Patel had the nerve to defy him."

"Oh, yes. Patel was a powerful man with his own ideas; that's why Gandhi favored Nehru. He thought Nehru would be more obedient to his ideas. But Gandhi never chose Nehru as his successor."

"So Gandhi had not designated Nehru to be the leader of Congress, therefore, the first Prime Minister of India?"

"No, definitely not. Did you know that Gandhi asked Nehru to allow Jinnah to be the first Prime Minister? He thought that was a solution to the Muslim problem. But Nehru was ambitious; he flatly refused."

"I had forgotten that detail, but I think it was mentioned in the movie. That one act could have saved India so much grief. And since Jinnah had tuberculosis, he would have been dead and out of the picture in less than a year. I can't believe India's fate.

"You know Jinnah has always been a puzzle to me. I've seen photos of him around 1947 and anyone could have discerned that he was a very sick man; the symptoms of TB must have been well known in those days. The British authorities were stepping aside to allow him to incite a revolution and commandeer a part of India. I have to wonder if they actually knew he had a short time left on the planet. If so, what were their real motives?"

"There are many things that are just now coming out. Just the week before he was assassinated, Gandhi had dictated a letter to his secretary, telling the Congress National League to disband. It had been formed to gain independence for India, and that had been accomplished. He emphasized that it was not a political party. Different parties should be formed according to different ideologies to stimulate debate and reform on the central government level. But he died before that letter was actually signed and delivered. And the letter was suppressed for all these years."

"I'm afraid it's obvious who benefited from that. Nehru was able to run a one man show as head of the one viable political party—Congress. One biographer said he didn't trust any authority to anyone. . . But I'm really surprised the letter had not been destroyed," I remark.

"It was kept in some file, somewhere, and it was recently dug out. A lot of things about the Nehru family are coming out now also."

"Do you think there's anything to that persistent rumor that Nehru was half-brother to the prince of Kashmir, and that was the real reason he would not let the Kashmiris vote as they had been promised? He was protecting his own family—and we know family ties in India can be very strong."

The Brahman simply shrugs, then changes the subject. "Ram Sadhu's family lived in the part of Punjab that went to Pakistan."

"Oh, dear. There are so many horrible stories of the losses of property—and even lives—of the Hindus there."

"Oh, yes. It was a serious situation. Even Ram Sadhu went back to his former home to help his family move to the Indian section and to get situated in a new home here."

"Oh, it was great that he was able to do that. Of course, he is a man unto himself. It's not like he has to obey any rules of some monastic order or religion."

Further, RamaKrishna informs me that the Sadhu's wife has come here to Kumbakonam several times in the past ten years since Ram Sadhu has lived in the ashram. She likes to spend a month or so here in the

holy atmosphere. She was seven years younger than he, so she must be ninety now.

Often we discuss some aspect of English literature. Although he had studied only a few American authors, RamaKrishna did read and appreciate Emerson.

“Actually Emerson was one of my favorite authors. Since I taught English literature, I was always happy to find insightful writing in English. I especially liked his poem *Brahma,* although he missed on the translation of the title. It should have been *Brahman,* the neuter form of *brh,* the Impersonal; not *Brahma,* the masculine form, which is the creator deity.”

He turns and rummages through some papers, and pulls out a typewritten page. Then he reads the words,

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn *The Brahman* sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

“That last line shows he truly understood that heaven is not a permanent abode. Pretty good for a Christian of his era,” I observe.

“Yes, it is wonderful how some intellectuals of both America and Britain seriously studied the Hindu thought.”

“Emerson must have been a contemporary of Thomas MacCauley, who wrote the most scathing criticism of Indian literature. So I’m glad both sides were represented.”

Siva RamaKrishna has visited the site of the controversial temple site at the birthplace of Rama. The Moslems destroyed the original Hindu temple, as they had done across India for centuries. “Loot, then destroy, the temples of the idolaters” was their war cry. All the Indian news sources state that a Moslem mosque has been built on the site over the ruins of the original temple. Although it is hallowed ground to the Hindus, the Moslems will not release it back to them. But Siva Ramakrishna tells me another version.

“I have seen it with my own eyes, Nancy. I assure you there is no mosque there, and never has been. There is a monument to a war hero, but not a place of worship.”

“That’s strange. Why perpetuate this debate then?” I question.

“I tell you, there is something else going on. They have even moved in Mosl ems to live in that area to keep the dissension alive. And then there was that incident with the massacre of all those *sadhus.*”

“Massacre of *sadhus*? I don’t know anything about that,” I exclaim.

“Yes. I understand the BBC carried the story, but it was totally suppressed in the Indian news. Hundreds of *sadhus* were advancing in mass to reclaim the Hindu sacred site from the Muslims. The Indian army troops arrived while they were still en route. The troops fired into the mob, killing hundreds of them. Then they loaded the bodies into lorries and carried them away. No one ever heard another word about it.”

“That is really strange,” I lament.

“But the details will have to come out. There is actual video footage of some of the massacre. It will be released when it is appropriate,” he adds.

“So this is more than a religious feud. I cannot comprehend what the Government has to gain by keeping this heated battle going,” I am quite perplexed.

“These things will all come out sooner or later.”

The roof of the verandah of the Brahman’s small hut is covered with an incredible vine that bears the loveliest lavender flowers, shaped like small trumpets with a scalloped edge. I am not the only one who enjoys them. Every time I come here I am able to see at least one extraordinary butterfly. All the common butterflies continually flutter through the garden here . The large black, white and fluorescent red one is always gliding about. They are so common here that I have come accustomed to its radiant presence, so I am no longer overwhelmed when I see one. A smaller white variety, veined with black is also plentiful. It appears rather plain until it folds its wings up and shows the orange and yellow underneath. Then one day a huge moth with mirrored wings shows up. I wonder if they were the inspiration for the mirror work on vests and bags made by the women in Rajasthan and Orissa. A couple of the school boys ran to get me to show it to me. I do not know how they knew I was a butterfly lover.

The next time I go to his hut to talk with him, I tell Shiva RamaKrishna, “I have really been thinking about Gandhi’s situation. When I was only about fifteen I read a book that really impressed me, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder. I have often said that it was the only true wisdom I heard or read until I was at least twenty-five. Do you know it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I know you were a professor of English literature, not American. Anyway, the premise of the book was that the moment of death is predetermined—and logical.”

I go on to explain, “One bright day in the jungles of South America, a bridge collapsed, plummeting some one dozen people to their deaths. The author painstakingly traced the life of each one of these people to demonstrate that, at that precise moment, it was a perfect time for their life to end. But it’s been so long since I read it that I can’t even recount one single example.

“So if you use that same hypothesis for Gandhi’s life, or simply *karma*, as you Hindus would put it, it does seem that Gandhi had done all he could. History was just moving in another direction; he was no longer needed. Maybe he even knew that his appeal to form parties would be ignored. Certainly, his economic and political policies were being ignored.”

Siva RamaKrishna agrees, “Yes, he died exactly a year after our Independence, so by that time it was evident that Nehru was going his own way. Even at the moment of Independence, Nehru defied Hindu custom. The British always handed over the reins to the new government at midnight. Everyone warned Nehru: This is not an auspicious time for the birth of a nation. But Nehru just would not listen. In many ways, he was more British than the historians comprehend. He himself was a *Brahman* and should have understood these things.”

"But he really knew little about the essence of Hinduism."

"No, he didn't know. He was a secular man. Gandhi saw all these things. Even Gandhi himself admitted that he was a failure."

"I didn't know that. Gandhi himself said he was a failure?"

"Oh, yes. At Independence, India erupted into a terrible civil war. He had no illusions about the failure of the Indians to rise to his ideals."

"I guess we all assumed that had it not been for him there would have been more violence."

"That is certainly true in limited instances because of the pressure of his fasting to end the killing. No one can fathom the number of Indians dead. There is no official account, but, I tell you, it was very disheartening—for all of us, and especially for Gandhi."

"The real enemy walked out unscathed, and the Indians killed each other. We Westerners called it a great success. So really Gandhi's non-violence just saved the British. I hope that is not why we have embraced it so."

While I am spending my usual hour in the morning sun reading, Ram Sadhu approaches me. "Now I want you to review that section of the *Ramayana* that we are going to read in class today. Tulasi Dasa recounts the best place for Rama to dwell. No one has ever written such a beautiful account of the residence suitable for Rama. Call it imagination or speculation, it doesn't matter. This section uplifts the aspiration of the *sadhak* [seeker]. That's all that matters."

I took my book to Siva RamaKrishna so he could point out the section to me. Just as we start discussing the pointers to indicate the best place for Rama to dwell, Ram Sadhu sticks his head in the door, "Is my daughter here?"

The Brahman jumps up to greet Ram Sadhu with a respectful salutation. The Sadhu places in his hands a couple of bananas and a *nimbu* for New Years.

Then he tells the Brahman: "I want her to understand the condition of that perfect temple where Rama dwells." He then turns his head to me and gives me a long meaningful look, "It is within."

"Yes, Swamiji, I suspected that."

As the Sadhu ducks out of the low door, Siva RamaKrishna sets the fruit aside, commenting, "He's always doing this kind of small thoughtful deed to all of us. He is always concerned for everyone else's welfare."

"Yes, he is a veritable ocean of sweetness. I know 'kindness' is the usual word, but whenever I think of him, 'sweet' is always the word that comes to my mind first."

"Yes, you are right; he is an ocean of sweetness."

"I feel so grateful to be here. My *punya* [merit from good deeds] must be considerable for me to be able to spend this special time on earth instead of waiting for heaven!"

Chapter Thirty

Punya Exhausted

Today, the last day of the year, I go into town today to pick up several items, including a lock to secure my belongings in a cabinet, so I won't have to cart them to Pondy for a week. I also drop by the train station to get the train schedules for Tanjavore as I may have to go Tanjavore occasionally to use the Speed Post service to send material back to Bombay. I also find the Gopal Row library where Mr. Guruswami borrowed my wonderful *Ramayana* book. It definitely has an adequate selection of books in English, all the *Upanisads,* Vedas, *Puranas,* and works of major sages. The librarian is willing to be cooperative about my borrowing books, so I will not have to worry about reference material for writing and editing.

When I return from town, I bring some Indian candies back with me. As I hand them to the Sadhu, he asks, "What is this?"

"It is written that the student should never come empty-handed to the *Guru,*" I tease. "I know that there is nothing I can give you. I'm simply playing the game."

"Yes, we are not doing anything ourselves. You give with that hand; I take in this hand, but it is not you giving, nor me taking. It is the Life, only the Life. Without It, these hands will not move; they won't even exist."

After the class, Ram Sadhu passes out the sweets to everyone. "Ask her why she does these things," he tells Shiva RamaKrishna.

"Tell him it's for my grandfather's family," I reply.

"But you are one of our family too, so there is no need," retorts the Brahman.

Again the *brahmachari* drops by to ask what I am doing when I am in my room. He does not seem to like the fact that I am working on the spiritual magazine. Since I had just finished up an issue in Pondy before coming here, I had not planned to be having any work to do either, but obviously it is as important as his daily newspaper reading. He even has tried to get me interested in the paper because occasionally there is some article about America, but I tell him I'm not interested. He is also reading a book by Swami Ramalinga, supposedly his first public talk. I mention that I visited the Swami's temple in Vadalur on my way to Kumbakonam. The book is a long one, some 1,000 pages thick. When I flip through it, I find it is similar to the one I saw in Vadalur, filled with cosmologies of all the different galaxies. Long lists that go on and on, not exactly light, or entertaining, reading.

My current project is to write a history on Sringeri, the monastery of the spiritual progenitor of the magazine. I thought I was taking a break, but the publisher thought I would have some extra time since I just completed an issue. Anyway, he sent me about a dozen Indian books to condense to one booklet, then he flew off for a vacation in Hong Kong. I suppose it is an improvement over several months ago when I waited a week in Bangalore for material to be edited, which I never received because he had flown off to vacation in Hong Kong, but I'm not really sure.

I have given most of the material a quick read through. Interestingly, a Sringeri Acharya also accomplished a disappearing act. Just like in Swami Ramalinga's case, he told no one to bother him for a

certain length of time. Naturally, the devotees had to break in and check on him before the allotted time was up. On the bench where he had been seated laid a beautifully carved column, that is, half of one. They figured had they obeyed his instructions the column would have been completed. I'm always gleaning interesting information when I'm writing or editing for the magazine, so that's what keeps me at it.

It remains too cool for me to take the traditional sacred bath in the Kauveri, although the Brahman continues to enter the chilly waters every day. The weather has totally changed since the water is in full flow; it's cold, cloudy and damp. The Kauveri River is called the Ganga of the South and held holy by all. The traditional belief that a dip in these holy rivers cleanse one of all *mala,* dirt, is surely dependent on the faith of the bather, a sort of baptism. I conjecture that most of us will not be transformed by this physical act.

January 1, 1991

New Year's morning dawns cloudy and gray. The fog has hung over the river like the breath of the earth dragon for several mornings. Just as I'm finishing reading a section of the *Ramayana,* I hear the unusual call of a bird, a loud trill repeated, repeated, and repeated again. It's just daylight, so I start out on my short morning stroll, hoping to catch a glimpse of the singer. I'm in luck for, on a small tree on the river bank, sits a turquoise and brown kingfisher. What a haughty fellow—to be so beautifully colored and have such a sonorous call. He soon flicks his wings and returns to the woods. I rarely see one of them at the river; this species usually hangs out at ponds.

In the afternoon, I get up early from my siesta, so I can bathe at least once in the waters of the holy Kauveri, for it is already disappearing fast. The water came up to the fifth step, but only for two chilly days. This morning it had withdrawn to the first step. I had hoped to be out when everyone was resting, but the Sadhu is already up and about, messing with his flowers, but with his back to me. I creep by silently, then admonish the squeaking gate to keep quiet as I slip down the stairs. I walk out one-third way across the river bed, but find no spot over a few inches deep. The main channel snakes back and forth between the two banks and hits the opposite shore in the *ashram* area. Anyway, I duck a couple of times, then just lie back to enjoy the water flowing over me. I would have liked to have had a swim. But the weight of my simple cotton pants and shirt are so heavy when wet, that I doubt I could have moved.

Later, that evening since I am still stranded on the north side of the river, I have been snooping about looking for possibilities for woods on this side. The bamboo forest beside the *ashram* does not attract any birds. Some of the clumps are growing naturally, but most of them are fenced in and tended to produce long straight poles for rafters and scaffolding. Returning to the *ashram*, I see the Sadhu out on the bench.

"It's *poornima,*" I call to him.

"Yes, today is the full moon."

How many times have I watched the sun setting beyond the banks of the Kauveri, yet I've never seen two sunsets even slightly similar. Ah, yes the creator does love variety. Ram Sadhu tells me that the Hindu seers—who cataloged everything—had even counted 8,400,000 species in the creation. It's certainly possible. There are thousands of creepy-crawlies just here in the *ashram*.

I am awakened in the middle of the night by a growling dog. Oh, well, I think, it woke me up to do the *pranayama*. But when I go out in the morning I discover what the growling was about—the dog chewed up my invincible sandals, only the rubber soles are left. This means another trip to town. Fortunately, I find a old pair of men's rubber sandals to wear, so I do not have to travel barefoot.

I waste a lot of time looking for a shoe store because I do not know the shoe store row. The custom here of grouping all stores of the same type together, instead of sprinkling them throughout the town is a nuisance, especially when one does not know the spot. But you can be sure when I find one , there will be

at least a dozen shops. Well, it makes comparative buying easy. While I'm in town, I consume a tender coconut and carry another one back for Siva RamaKrishna.

When I return, immediately I take it to him, "I know that since you are a south Indian you must love *ilinir* as much as I. Maybe I was a south Indian in a previous life."

"Well, that may actually be so. According to the Kanchi Acharya all of mankind lived together on one continent. More importantly, he asserts that everyone lived under the law and wisdom of the Vedas. Therefore, all people are ancestors of that original race and all religions are a branch of that original religion."

That afternoon in class, he covered the part of the story where King Dasaratha dies from grief because of Rama's banishment to the forest. From my reading, I know approximately where he is in the text, but I am startled when the Sadhu breaks out in tears. At first I think the intermittent sobbing is some breathing exercise. When I finally realize he is actually crying, I think maybe he saw a vision of my life, as he had been looking right at me—some of my antics would surely be enough to bring a pure man to tears!

That evening at supper I ask the *brahmachari* why Swamiji cried in class. He explains to me that it is because of his sorrow at the death of the honorable King Dasaratha. While I am outside washing my dishes, the Sadhu enters the kitchen hut. As I enter to tuck my stainless steel plate in the bamboo rafters to dry, I hear the *brahmachari* telling him that I had asked why he had cried.

The Sadhu turns to me, "My daughter, you must understand, this is my life. To me this is not just a story. For me it is all joy. But when I hear of the suffering of others, it brings tears to my eyes.
All are crying 'I', 'I', 'I' but they never question who is this 'I'. An ocean of 'I's is the existence of *sat-chit-ananda*. That is Rama. Enjoy the Life."

"All else only *nama rupa* [names and forms]?"

"Yes, you understand."

The moon has not yet risen so the stars are unusually bright. A fire fly cries "I", "I", "I" as he lights up the shaded path under the sprawling neem tree. A gentle breeze waves the palm fronds and tousles my hair. It is "I"; it is "I."

January 3, 1991

I got up this morning fighting off dullness. I guess the limited hours of sleep have finally caught up with me. Only the thought "Swamiji deserves a better student than this" gets me moving. My body has already adjusted to the wood-plank bed, so discomfort is no longer an aid in getting me up in the morning.

Later, when I am sitting on my usual bench inside my open door, writing in my journal, the Sadhu comes up with his big toothless smile. He places a piece of paper with the words written on it:

> Of what avail this body mind
> If hearing God's performance fine
> The heart breaks and then melts not
> The eyes disclose tears gush not
> The body does not shake and thrill
> When the Lord's story his ears doth fill.

"So now you understand my tears?"

"Yes, Swamiji, I do understand."

"Of what use is this heart if it is not melting with the thought of God."

“I do understand.”

We have a long rest period after lunch, from 12:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., so several times I’ve just lain on the bed and practiced some relaxation or meditation technique. One day I had actually not slept, but I remained very relaxed, then got up very refreshed after thirty minutes although I had not slept. This has not reoccurred, and some afternoons I am dead tired—sleeping for up to one and one-half hours. I fear that the *pranayama* technique has not helped my energy level as I had hoped it would. So today, instead of sleeping, I decided to ferret back through the files of my mind to see if there is some clue somewhere that I was destined for a spiritual life.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Like everyone, I experienced my crystallization process in my childhood, especially after I started school. Those memories brought up some feelings, but certainly I never had any spiritual experiences, devout disposition, or any outstanding character. In fact I was normal, ordinary and middle class. I was kind to the underdog several times, more so than normal for my age, but beyond this rag yanked out of the bottom of the barrel to find “something,” the barrel is empty. I think the making of the robots that schooling aims for, and achieves, is totally counterpoint to individual creativity and expression, although some adapt easier than others. In some way, I resisted, maybe by just never making studies important or giving my best, since it was so easy for me to get by without studying much. In itself, that presents no problem, but the fact I found nothing that merited giving my best to; yes, I think that has been an obstacle in my development.

When the *brahmachari* brings 3:00 p.m. tea, he is also carrying a new “Guest Book.” On the first two pages are enumerated the rules for “Visitors and Devotees.” First comes the announcement in bold letters that “Visitors and Devotees” are welcome for only three nights. Following is a declaration that there was no provision for anyone to stay permanently under any circumstance. The *brahmachari* tells me that the Sadhu had requested that he bring it to me to sign as the first guest.

Rejection, true and clear spreads over me and settles right in my gut. My intellect tells me that those two conditions could not apply to me since I am already here, but my feelings take no heed. Had not Ram Sadhu himself invited me to stay? Would not he directly tell me to go? I just have a feeling that this book was in fact created because of me. Oh, the anguish of rejection— how it knots the stomach and kills the rational mind.

I drop the subject of rejection during the class, but afterward my mind picks up the knitting again. *My bags are kept packed. I was moving when I arrived here and I will continue moving when I leave here,* I realistically sum up the situation in my mind.

To subject my mind to more useful endeavors I go over to the Brahman’s hut to discuss several points on the *Ramayana* where Tulasi Dasa has changed the characters or action somewhat from the original Sanskrit version of Kali Dasa. I have in the back of my mind to ask his opinion about the guest book, but no opportunity arises, or rather in talking with him my mind is soon engaged in a world beyond guest books.

Now here is a startling aspect of the *Ramayana*. From one aspect, the whole world was put into chaos for the sake of the carrying out of a curse. Yes, the villain, Ravana, was actually a guardian of the palatial heavenly gates of Vishnu. I take the opportunity to ask the Siva Ramakrishna this question that has been bugging me.

“I have heard that Ravana was a highly evolved person, actually a *Brahman*. Now how did he end up the villain in such an unholy war?”

“Good question. Here is how it happened. There were two gate-keepers in *Vaikunta* [heaven], Jaya and Vijaya. You couldn’t say that they were the highest *devas* [beings of light], but they were heavenly beings. One day while they were on duty, the hermit Sanaka approached the gate with the intention of paying homage to Lord Vishnu. Not realizing the spiritual statue of the unsightly *sadhu*. . . . You know how Indian *sadhus* look?”

"Oh, yes. I've been to Rishikesh, where they vie for the title of being the most outrageous looking."

"Yes, you know what I mean. Since the gatekeepers had no idea that he was a sage from his appearance, they refused his entrance. Sanaka had spent his entire life practicing *tapas* [austerities], including total celibacy. He was not one to be told what to do. So he cursed the gatekeepers to three lives on earth as *asuras* [demons]. They protested such a terrible fate, so Sanaka told them that while on earth they would receive the blessing of being killed by Lord Vishnu himself."

"So Lord Vishnu had to be born because of the words of a *sadhu*? Amazing!" I interject. "So that is why they were on earth, to fulfill that curse? But why did Sri Rama have to incarnate on earth for this task?"

"Remember, Nancy, there is a Rama born in each *yuga*."

"A Rama born in each *yuga*? No, I did not know that."

I eat in the kitchen in the evening. I never knew the reason why half the time the *brahmachari* brings my filled plate to my room and the other evenings, he calls me to the dining hut. Maybe there is no reason. Tonight a stranger is present, not eating, just hanging around. Several younger boys from the orphanage, who take turn helping in the *ashram* kitchen, are lined up across from me. We all eat the same food. When I start eating, I am aware that the stranger, along with boys are all staring at me. I have gotten used to eating under the eyes of an audience; at least, I pretend that I have.

After a few minutes, the *brahmachari* explains to me that this man has come from a nearby village in which lives the Tamil overseer of Hinduism, let's say an equivalent of a bishop. He had visited Ram Sadhu some time ago. Since then, every month he sends about eighteen pounds of various *dals* (dried beans), a large packet of Indian spices and a dozen coconuts to the *ashram*.

Upon departing from his visit, he had asked Ram Sadhu, "What can I do for you—whatever you want. You name it and it shall be done immediately."

"I have everything I need here, even more than I need. I want nothing at all, " the Sadhu replied.

Further the Swami asked him, "You lead such a peaceful life here. I have longed for such a quiet, peaceful life. And now I have all the responsibility of a big organization."

"That is your *dharma* [duty] in life and you must fulfill it. It is my *dharma* to sit quietly. We cannot exchange our destinies."

The *brahmachari* goes on to mention that he is not the only person who has offered Ram Sadhu the fulfillment of any wish. Another was a very wealthy lady; another a *sadhu* from Trichy who can change lead to gold, produce ash out of thin air, and "these kinds of things."

"Like Sai Baba."

"Yes, like that."

The stranger, who speaks no English and therefore is just an onlooker, then asks the *brahmachari* something.

"He is curious about you, since such a master as Ram Sadhu has accepted you as a student. He is calling you to visit his master's *ashram*."

"When I've found diamond, why would I go looking for gold. You said yourself that Swami sends sincere seekers here to Ram Sadhu, not the other way around."

January 4, 1991

Again there was a sunrise that outdid the recent sunsets. The water glowed a warm pink as the light fog dissipated in the light of the sun. I was not quite so dull this morning upon awakening. While I am in Pondicherry I will be able to catch up on sleep, surely that will make a difference.

I spent a normal day with yoga, *pranayama*, reading—my daily schedule is nicely set now. During my evening walk, I return to the nearby lily pond to pick a lovely water hyacinth. They are so beautiful, this variety has a eye of purple dotted with yellow on its upper petal. Since they are so common here, they are considered a water weed. Usha calls them the "damn sewer flowers." Nevertheless, I remain their admirer and enjoy seeing them in the ponds and drainage ditches all over the south.

Tonight dinner is brought to my room. I eat, then carry my plate over to the outdoor facet, wash it, and return it to the kitchen. The Sadhu is not out tonight, so I return to my room, close and lock the door for the night. Some time later, perhaps thirty minutes, there is a rap at the door. I am not surprised.

"When are you leaving?" asks the *brahmachari*.

"Tomorrow at 11:00 in the morning."

"How long will you stay in Pondicherry."

"Only one week."

"Then what is your program?"

"Ram Sadhu has told me to come back here."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You see this cottage is that lady's. She usually comes and stays on Sunday, but now she is keeping away for your sake."

"I see."

"Anyway, you read the rules in the guest book—only three days stay, so you have already been here one month. So that is the most we can accommodate you. Annaji says no one can stay here permanently. You read it in the book, especially a woman. We are all men here. Some *ashrams* have a ladies' quarters, but we have no such facility here. If you wanted to stay outside somewhere, you could come here during the day."

"I don't think there is a suitable place outside, do you?"

"Annaji might think of something. What is your goal? Tell me that."

"I simply want a quiet place, with a holy presence, where I can do *sadhana*. Anything else I can do at home, can't I?"

"Well, people come here, and Swamiji always tells them to stay, calls them his son and daughter. We can't be expected to look after all these people, so we have to take on the task of sending them away."

"I see."

"So Ram Sadhu knows that you are sending me away?"

"Oh, yes, he knows. But he himself would not ask you to leave. He said that if is our *ashram* rules, then we must be the ones to ask you to go. He said he sees all alike: man, woman or thief."

"I see."

I bolt the door behind the *brahmachari*. All the rejection and disappointment I've faced up to this moment in my life were just a preparation for facing this moment. Interestingly, during my evening walk

I had recounted my fear, or doubt, of my ability to have enough discipline and energy to live a spiritual life. The moment of facing the fact I am less than I hoped for has arrived. Didn't I write yesterday I have no appointments with the future. The river of time flows on, carrying me along.

January 5, 1991
The river is only one-fourth full today. In a few days it will return to the few small streams flowing down a wide sandy bed as it was when I first found it. As I walk in the cool of early daylight small things cross my mind to lament: The great library I had found, inviting friends here to meet a true master, and fulfilling my dreams of really finding out firsthand what this spiritual trip is about. If I had not made plans, I would not be experiencing disappointment about fulfilling them.

After breakfast, I go over to have a talk with Siva Ramakrishna. He expresses surprise that I have been asked to leave, but he fills me in on some details that surely influenced my expulsion.

"But you did see that new 'Guest Book' that states a three-day limit for all guests?" I ask him.

"Yes, I even helped them with the spelling of the English. But that was for visitors. You were already here as a permanent resident, invited by Swamiji, that book could not apply to you."

"Well, it did apply to me. In fact, I suspect that it was created for me."

"This comes as a shock to me. Ram Sadhu was so happy to have you here. He thought that you had come all this distance seeking spiritual wisdom, so we should help you to our full capacity. He told me so, and told me to help explain any points to you since he does not feel that his English is adequate."

"But there must be so many students coming to meet such a master that it is difficult to accommodate them. The *brahmachari* said that so many people come that they have to ask to leave."

"No, not at all. There are very few people today who are interested in *sanatana dharma* [eternal wisdom]. I fear that Hindus today are only interested in going to the temple to ask the deities for favors in their material life."

"That is true, isn't it? And it is also true in Christianity, praying to God for so many things. Actually, religions were created to nurture our spiritual life; but we have completely turned them around to create them in our own 'image' to be able sustain our material life."

"So it's true even in Christianity too?" Then he returns to the matter at hand, "We hardly ever have guests; that cottage has been standing empty for months on end—waiting for you. It seemed perfect."

"But *brahmachari* told me that it is Amma's and that she needs it to come on the weekends."

"She built that cottage for our use, not for her use. She lives in Madras and only comes to Kumbakonam a couple of months out of the year. And as you have noted, she does not stay here when she comes. She always stays at that other *ashram*. We can't keep up a cottage for the one or two nights she stays here in a year, and she does not expect it."

So I bring up another issue, "Then there is the woman thing; I don't think a couple of the residents care for a woman being here. The *brahmachari* mentioned it."

"Nancy, in our *Manusmriti* [laws given by Manu] the women are given the heavier burden. You westerners interpret it negatively. If you study the *smritis* [Manu's words] carefully, you will find that the more intelligent and more responsible are always given the heavier burden without exception."

"Well, I did know that in relation to *Brahmans*. When it comes to the duties and responsibilities of caste, the Brahman has the heaviest load of duties, or, in cases of infraction of the rules, the severest punishment. So you mean that it is the same with women? More is expected of them since they are more

capable. That's interesting."

"Yes, as you may know, a religious ceremony done by a wife or mother is much more effective than one performed by a priest." He pauses and then continues in a low voice, "You see, there was one other guest about a year ago. He created a problem."

"A problem?"

"Yes, you see we did have a woman living here, for quite a few years. She built a cottage for herself, where Swami Karunananda now lives, and retired here. Last year a young *sadhu* came. He seemed nice enough, and seemed interested in scriptural studies. He and the lady became fast friends. She would cook little snacks and treats for tea time, so he would spend some time in her cottage talking. She was like a mother to him."

"Both of them were Indians?"

"Oh, yes. He was from Madras. Although it seems he had some story about working in the foreign, perhaps the Middle East. Really, we did not question him much, that's not our purpose here."

He lowered his voice to a whisper, "One day, the young man disappeared during the night. The next morning, the lady was found dead in her bed. All her gold and diamond jewelry was missing."

"That must have been quite a blow to everyone."

"I can tell you that it was quite a blow. There was a real commotion with the police and all. However, they found no evidence of foul play. Apparently, she died of natural causes and the young man found her and took advantage of the situation to take her jewelry.

"Of course, they searched for him. As it turned out, he had visited several other *ashrams* and had left them all suddenly, stealing typewriters, tape recorders, and such," he concludes the story.

"Well, that certainly would influence the manager's opinion about having a woman in the *ashram*."

"Yes, of course. I'm afraid it has."

These new details do change my perception of the situation, but not my disappointment. Sri Siva RamaKrishna continues to assure me that Ram Sadhu had planned that I was to live here. "He had even asked me to help you in any way I could. Specifically, I should find time to answer any questions, so that you would understand the true meaning of our *sanathana dharma*."

When I go to tell Ram Sadhu good-bye, I simply say, "I'm leaving today for Pondicherry. You know *ashram* management has told me I should not return."

"Yes, I know. This *ashram* management. . . . I'm a *sadhu* I cannot get involved in these *ashram* management things. If I did, I would soon be a *samsari* [ordinary struggling person]. Please forgive me and understand."

"Anyway, I'm so grateful for the time I've spent with you. You've been very kind."

"Yes, I know you are grateful. I feel it. You know I have three daughters of my own. When I renounced, I left them and have never even written them a letter. That is the life of a *sadhu*."

"Yes, I understand."

My bags are packed and waiting, as I pick them up and head toward the gate, the Brahman comes out to the path to bid me farewell. The Sadhu sees him and comes hobbling out, "Let her go—she will never be alone, for we will go with her."

I stand for a moment immersed in my feelings, my abundant gratefullness and my incredible disappointment. What is it I wanted? What is it that I think I am losing? Where do I go from here? These are questions I will have to contemplate for some time. With tears in my eyes, I take a long pause at the river gate and smile down on the stream. Sitting here on the banks of the Kauveri in the presence of a saint, I have known peace. That peace still comes back to me when I remember the clear radiant eyes of Ram Sadhu and the gentle flowing of the river.

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Chapter Thirty-one

War and Peace

Back in Pondy, I am quickly catapulted into the real world. Shanta and Dilip, a married couple whom Usha and I met through Maggie, now have the cable TV channel. At last the Indians can have more than one channel. But all that's on it is CNN news about the Gulf War. I suppose war is still inevitable, given the consciousness of "human doings" in today's world. In spite of my anguish over human killing human, I have to smile as the self-righteous British—whose Empire directly created Sadam Hussein and Qaddafi—condemn Hussein for doing what they were doing all over the planet less than one hundred years ago. Well, we are certainly more civilized now. Wait a minute, the British Empire was created in the name of civilization. I think it's just the "we can dish it out, but we sure can't take it" European-supremacist attitude surfacing again.

One hundred years ago is inaccurate too. How about World War I? I recently read Michael Yardley's great biography of T.E. Lawrence in which he recounts the duplicity of the British and French in World War I in dealing with the Arabs. Interestingly, Lawrence was a first-hand witness. I love biographies and have always lamented that they are not used for our history classes instead of the traditional textbooks filled with names and dates devoid of any human sentiment. I am sure any student would understand much more about World War I if they read a couple of biographies of the key players instead of a multitude of places and dates of battles. Of course, if they read this particular book, they might think twice before they took up arms to defend their governments, and to fight against countries that have been ground down by foreign powers.

I did have some vague idea that the French and British had grabbed some countries in the Middle East for themselves after World War I, but certainly not these details. As it turns out, France and Britain signed the Sykes-Picot Treaty, stating their division of spoils at the beginning of World War I. France would get Syria, Lebanon, and the Mosul oil fields. Britain would get Mesopotamia (minus Mosul), which included Kuwait. Palestine would be declared international territory—
everyone wanted the only fertile lands in the Arabian desert. Then these Allies bribed Italy to enter the war, again with the promise of spoils: Libya (then a part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire) and retention of any colonies already occupied by Italy. In spite of the existence of their treaty, the Allies then officially promised the Arabs "self-determination" of their choice of government after the war, in exchange for their help in beating the Turks. After the victory, the only thing the French and British remembered of self-determination was their own.

However, I had no idea of a small act in the farce; that is, the extent that the British-India Office in Delhi had been involved in the duplicity. The Delhi officials had been openly feuding with the British Foreign Office in London over control of the Middle East since 1915. The officials in Delhi were concerned because the war affected the large Muslim population in India who gave their allegiance to Islam.

Picture this set up: two traditional leaders of Arabian clans battling it out over Palestine. One of them, Abdullah Hussein (grandfather of King Hussein of Jordan), was backed by the London Foreign Office. While the other contender, Ibn Saud (future king of Saudi Arabia) was backed by the Delhi. To the London Government's surprise, Delhi's man won.

Delhi and London also struggled over Mesopotamia, soon to be named Iraq. But London won there, even though formerly Mesopotamia had fallen under the jurisdiction of the British Office in Delhi. The

London officials quickly installed Faisal Hussein as the ruler through the electoral system by blatantly rigging the elections. Nevertheless, the Delhi Office supplied most of the clerks for the government, so they could keep their finger in the Iraqi pie.

Considering this record of the Allies, then augmented by current economic reprisals, it seems it would be easy for a despot to convince the populace that there is a real enemy out there. I keep asking, "What are the British doing?" No news report mentions the country responsible for planting the seeds for this disaster. If Hussein is in a financial crunch, couldn't it partially be due to the ramifications of World War I and II and the Empire Era? Couldn't there be other solutions to deal with the Iraqis—with an attitude of making amends? Where did the Queen get all her wealth anyway? For starters, one could take an inventory of the crown jewels and ascertain how many of them were actually purchased! Don't our scriptures say that the sins of our fathers are visited upon us for seven generations?

I am so frustrated that all the international news we get is from CNN. Suddenly, its coverage sounds very provincial. We Americans never learned much European history, and certainly not any Middle Eastern or Asian history.

Soon I have my visa in order, so I am happy to leave the war behind and head for the Forest of Peace, the ashram of a Christian monk, Father Bede Griffiths. It is truly a beautiful spot on the Kauveri River near Trichy, about 60 miles upstream from Kumbakonam. I quickly settle into the daily routine. Hardly, anyone gets up for the 5:30 a.m. morning chanting. After my pre-dawn rising in Kumbakonam, it seems easy for me. The chanting serves to wake me up for the thirty minutes of meditation that follows.

Then Father Bede arrives to lead a prayer service in his soft, gentle voice. His countenance is truly angelic; he could have been a model for one of the heavenly host in Michelangelo's frescos. By the time, he starts to speak, everyone has drifted in until the small chapel is packed. The service ends with Eucharist.

Although a scholar and intellect, Father Bede's short inspirational talks are humble and sweet, with no profound depth. Everyone always attends his talks, for just being in his presence is uplifting. I continue to go through his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita, The River of Compassion,* so that gives me more material to understand his ideas.

Interestingly, Father Bede, a Brit, made a few comments on the general criticizing of the Americans that is going on among the Europeans here. He pointed out that the war was a decision of the international community including Saudi Arabia, so it was unjustifiable to blame it on the Americans. In addition, he pointed out that although he was certainly a pacifist himself, that one could hardly expect to have peace while allowing criminals a free hand. Hussein had violated international law and had been given every opportunity to rescind.

Every morning, I save some food from breakfast to go to the river to feed the fish. I wander along the broad and quiet Kauveri while chanting the *Gayatri Mantra.* What a difference in the river here and in Kumbakonam. Here the streamlets are almost as wide as the river bed there. From this side the bed is so broad, I cannot see the other bank. However, I find a few shallow spots to cross in knee-deep water. I walk through the maze of sand banks until I am quite out of sight of the shore. Then I strip off my top layer of clothing and lie in the deep still water of one of the pools. Unfortunately, the only place I have found water deep enough for swimming is along the bank closest to the ashram—impossible without a bathing suit and the exposure of female parts is even questionable with one.

Cranes, small brown plovers, bee catchers, plus an occasional tern and myna frequent the whole complex of streams, pools, sand banks and grassy knolls. The water is just cool enough to be very refreshing, but the coolness lasts just long enough for the quarter-mile hike back to the ashram. Usually, I go to the meditation hall to meditate, with a break for *yoga* if I start to feel dull. Then I take a trip over to the library to partake of all the books on the wonderful European Christian saints, the knowledge of whom is quite enlightening. They have actually described the mystical path as good as the Hindus, and with lots of similarities; for example, the description "as the river disappears into the ocean, the individual merges

into the Godhead."

I sleep in a dorm-style room with seven or eight beds. Most people come through and just stay a night or two. Since this place is listed in the tour books, it is a regular stop for all European, particularly British tourists. However, one roommate, an American, plans to stay for a period of serious *sadhana*. Mary had just completed a year working in Pakistan helping the Afghan refugees, that is the refugee government, happily living on American aid. She says it is obvious why they were thrown out of the country: they are the greediest people imaginable. However, they are quite satisfied now, for they quickly discovered that they can suck much more out of the fount of American aid than out of some peasant dirt farmers. I cannot comprehend why Russia and Britain have been fighting over Afghanistan for centuries. Mary feels really disgusted, disgruntled and off-center after her experiences and is taking time off to spend in this peaceful atmosphere to get back on track.

Since the Gulf War continues to be escalating, the U.S. Embassy sent someone out here to post a notice that it could be dangerous for Americans to travel. Nevertheless, an American gentleman arrived last night. Judging from his business suit and his tons of luggage, I bet Mary that he was a professional photographer, planning to video-tape Father Bede. I was wrong, for the next morning in the prayer service, we spot him sitting in the front row with the Indian Fathers.

For no particular reason, other than I am inclined to want to get to know interesting people, I have a whim to meet the newly arrived Father. I usually do not drink coffee, but I go over at coffee time just to see if the Father is there. The timing is good because I arrive just at the moment that the Father does. By coincidence, I sit down by a person he knows, so he joins us.

Within moments, he and I are drawn into a profound exchange, so intense that the third person quickly drifts away. In response to his question of what is my purpose of being in India, I explain to him I am in a personal dilemma. After leaving Atheetha Ashram, I have just been stumbling around from place to place, going through the crazy situations that only India can produce. Then when it looked as I had at last found the perfect situation, I had a real disappointment. Then I go on to describe my crisis at Ram Sadhu's ashram.

"Did you feel rejection?" he questions me.

"Yes. Definitely."

"I had the same experience of rejection once when I tried to join a monastery and they refused me. I experienced terrible rejection," he shares with me.

"How did that happen?"

"I was actually a novice at a large monastery. One day for apparently no reason at all, the Abbot just told me to pack my bags and get out."

"No explanation?"

"No explanation. The Father in charge of my group even spoke up for me. He went to the Abbot and asked him for an explanation. The Father felt that I was a good student; I had always obeyed all the rules. But the Abbot wouldn't even give him a reason."

"How devastating. In one moment, one man could totally change your whole life plan. I had not vested so much time and energy into my plan."

After a few moments of silence, I continue, "I had dared think, at least momentarily, that my rambling had finally ended, that I had found something of value. So in the end I told myself, 'You really didn't deserve it after all.'"

"But that is very Christian; the 'guilt' and 'deserve' nonsense. You should feel there is something new opening up for you," he wisely advised me.

"Yes, I see your point. But first, there was the undeniable feeling, 'I didn't deserve this.'" I pause, then continue, "You know Hindus also have the same concept that what you encounter in the world is a reflection of your own mind. So you are only meeting outside what you have in your own life plan, predestined from previous actions. Now I'm not saying that I accept the theory of *karma* is written in stone; however, it seems to be a viable hypothesis that can help one retain equanimity through the blows of life. That's the important point: peace of mind."

For over an hour, we discussed many aspects of Hinduism, the four stages of life versus celibacy, Adi Sankaracharya and his monasteries, study of Sanskrit, and long-term visas for India. He appears very open and really wants to comprehend the Hindu view of life. He seems, like myself, to be curious to know what it would be like to look at the world through an entirely different mindset.

Sometime in the conversation, I mention that I am now collecting information on the subject of enlightenment. "Actually, once I did have a profound mystical experience. So I am also trying to figure out how that fits into the marketplace of life," I mention.

"You know I thought that you must have had a real experience when you said you were in India for three years. When I was a young man, I had an wonderful experience of ecstasy. Prior to that time, I was having a very difficult time with celibacy, but I controlled myself. Then I had a beautiful ecstasy that lasted for days. That experience has sustained me."

"I certainly would not have stayed interested in a spiritual outlook on life if I had not had such an experience. I would have lost faith long ago, for sure," I agree.

"And the longing to know that experience again is a tremendous impetus—but it is desire too. Even the wish for enlightenment is desire," he reflects.

"Definitely, but we donkeys have to have some carrot—the golden carrot, I call it. Then the time comes for dismissing even the goal, but it won't be easy."

"You know Father Bede had a tremendous experience when he was spontaneously healed from a stroke last year. He said that he felt so much love that it is impossible to describe. He's actually a different person now; everyone thinks so. Before he remained the stoic, reserved, stiff-upper-lip Brit. You cannot imagine the change in him." A thoughtful look crosses his face before he continues, "We do not know how to love. We have never really experienced it. As Father Bede mentioned in his homily last night, love is the basis for all."

I comment, "Oh, when I had that experience, I felt so much love that I could have bowed down to hug an ant. All around us is so much struggle and hardship, but through those eyes everything and everyone looked so beautiful and so perfect, even here in India—a true test.

"See, that's what I want—that love. To me that's more important than enlightenment. So I would rather have that love, even with darkness, although with light would be best."

"You do have a good point," I agree with a smile.

Father Bede continued to have lapses of memory and to feel weak, so he left this morning for the cooler temperatures of a hill station, for he is hoping it will help his condition. This means I will not get an opportunity to talk with him, even though in the course of the last couple of days I have come up with a question for him.

One night when a woman brought up the question of redemption, I was taken aback. I had really begun to comprehend and accept Christianity because of my study of Hinduism and my contact with European Christians. However, in my religious comparisons, I had entirely forgotten the "original sin—redemption" thing. Apparently, I am succeeding in my quest for a new mindset. In Hinduism, and

its sister religions, Jainism and Buddhism, there is no concept of original sin. To them, our origin is divine. Yes, there is a veil that we have superimposed over that divinity, but our divinity is never touched by the veil—no matter how dirty it gets. The Hindu sages never dwelt on the sinner stuff, they always called their flock the “children of light.” They were the ancestors of Bharatha, a historical king, who was of the lineage of Lord Vishnu. King Bharatha’s enlightened rule is said to have endured for some twenty-seven thousand years.

The Hindus actually believe that the life on the planet is in a state of devolution, not evolution. The peaceable kingdom has already happened. King Bharatha’s time would probably fall in the Silver Age, after the heavenly kingdom of the Golden Age. Third was the Bronze Age, then the Iron Age, or *Kali Yuga*. Yes, you guessed it, we are now in the doldrums of the *Kali Yuga*. This downward trend is also symbolized in the Hebrew Fall, but in Hindu thought it is a process, instead of a spontaneous occurrence, as in the Bible. In contrast, Hindu theorists consider that the creation was spontaneous and not a process as do the western scientists.

Daily I continue to walk by the river while chanting the *Gayatri Mantra*. It expresses such a beautiful thought, “may my actions be in sync with the highest good.” After a few days, I feel that I am floating along the sandy banks. This “Forest of Peace” is in such a beautiful, quiet setting; I feel I have found the Garden of Eden right here on earth. I begin to feel the peace so profoundly that it becomes alive. So vibrant that it seems to quell everything else, like a long, broad gaze at the world, rather than a close, focused study. Swami Nirmalananda was right; it comes straight from the heart. It is just an attitude, but an attitude that is impossible to manufacture. At Pondicherry, I often felt that the silence was descending on me; but now I feel that it is spilling out of me.

With Father Bede gone, everyone is clearing out of the ashram, so I return to Pondy. There I am shocked to read a report in Newsweek (available in the library) that Bush’s popularity is at an all time high because of the victory. Even the British voted Churchill out after the war. So the ole’ competitive spirit brings us to celebrate victory in war, instead of lamenting the war reality. Is that all we learned from Vietnam? It’s not that we do like war, we just do not like to lose wars.

Chapter Thirty-two

Gifts from Bharata

India is a "wounded civilization," as the Indian author Naipal put it. The prevalent theory in the West—that the Indian's passiveness is due to their theory of *karma*—is totally and completely preposterous. *Karma* simply means action; three-fourths of the Vedas are dedicated to methods and prayers for acting successfully in the world. Indians are passive because they have been beaten down by every barbaric race that thundered across Asia Minor, then the Arabian Sea, to loot their land of riches—so wealthy that the obsession in Europe for centuries was to find a passage to India that would avoid the heavy taxation of goods when they crossed the Arabian deserts.

While it is true the atrocities committed by their most recent British conquerors were accepted with resignation in this land where terrors of war have been relentless. But by the time they arrived, the Indians had "adjusted." A foreign influence first penetrated the area in approximately 1500 BC when the Aryans arrived. Even though they wrote poetry that praised their superior weaponry, it appears that they may have taken over the people without having to inflict much death. Alexander the Great arrived in 327 BC to conquer the northwest section. Although he did little damage because his army was battle weary, he did leave men to colonize his claim. Some of their descendants are still living in a community in isolated mountain areas in the Rajasthan area.

The serious onslaught began in the 5th century when a clan of Hun invaders arrived looking for booty. Each of the next eight centuries was highlighted by a major Muslim incursion of death, destruction and plunder. In the 10th century, the Turks reached the interior, led by the ferocious Mahmod of Gazni (an Afghan). In the 11th century, the Moslems sacked the capital of the Gupta Empire, pillaging and destroying 10,000 temples. In the 12th century, another Afghan tribe of Turks demolished Delhi to establish their capital, then extend their territory on a bloody trail all the way to Madurai in the south. In the late 14th century, Timberlane, the Turk who claimed a blood line to Genghis Khan, threw out the Turk Sultans, after sacking and ravaging Delhi again. A hundred years later, Babur's terrible armies killed thousands while again sacking Delhi. His personal claim to fame was that he would kill five enemies every five minutes.

In 1565, the last stronghold of the Hindu kings at Vijayanagar was captured and devastated—not a building or a tree remained—by an alliance of Sultans. Delhi was again raided in the mid-18th century by Nadir Shah when the Turks attempted to recapture the throne from the Moguls. He returned to Persia with vast treasures, including the Peacock Throne and Kohinoor Diamond, along with thousands of slaves.

In 1498, the Portuguese arrived, followed by the French and British. When the British won out, the devastation began in serious. There are hundreds of examples of massacres, but I will give just one: Yes, the Indians did revolt against the British once, but few lived to regret it. This first spark of independence in 1857 even produced India's Joan of Arc, the *Rani* (Queen) of Jhansi rode out on horseback to distinguished herself in direct battle. In spite of many similar heroic acts, the Indians lost. The Indian soldiers who survived were lashed to canons while still alive and blown to bits. How does a people fight against invaders with such a penchant for fire power and blood that they can afford to expend a canon ball to kill one person? While, on the one hand, it was just another massacre to the Indians, it was a turning point; never again could they believe that the Europeans were a superior people. The British called it a "mutiny."

You must have gotten the point—now tell me that the Indians are passive because they believe in *karma.* They are passive because they are intelligent. The simple truth is the conquerors that came to sack their country always had superior weaponry, while backing their brutality with sophistry. Both the Moslems and the Christians justified their sins with religious prejudices and rationalizations.

Aubrey Menon, an Indian author, wrote in his book *The Space Within the Heart* about his study of the Upanisads:

[My study] was to prove an insight into the hoax that all of us accept as complete living... [I realized] my life had been the laborious construct of other people, some well-intentioned, some malign, some just interfering. It has been a life of emotion invented for me to feel. It has been life designed so that I should never be my own man. . . .”

Surely, the same can be said of the nation now called India, founded and named by its foreign invaders. Bharata has been discovered and rediscovered many times in other people’s terms. We know it as opulent India, decadent India, and the land of poverty. European traders vied and fought for its wealth in spices—until they discovered the diamonds. India was termed the “white man’s burden,” whose “benighted heathens” needed the blessing of European civilization. Considering it the wealthiest country in the world, the Persians Muslims looted it relentlessly for years. On the other hand, the ancient Greeks and Chinese visited it for its treasuries of wisdom. India has been struggling to free herself from these foreign definitions since its Independence in 1947.

I have been here over a year now, and am thinking about what I have learned about India. In the end, perhaps I came here to learn about myself. Bharata and her people have touched my heart and sensibilities in many ways. What I have recounted here is only a tiny tip of a verdant green mountain. Although the wisdom I gained will always remain with me, Bharata has given me something more, so subtle, yet so loud and clear. The true wealth is the people, their uniqueness, their faith in the face of adversity, for they include the greatest intellects, and the kindest souls. Personally, I cannot conceive how these kind and generous people will move into a future without their cultural roots. Will they dare to peel off the layers and keep what is true to their heritage as “children of light”?

Every place I have visited has given me a unique gift. Of course, the most valuable gift is my friendship with Usha. She is so intelligent, spontaneous, and bright; definitely, the support that made my lengthy stay here possible.

At Atheetha ashram, I was given the opportunity to accept the many possible ways to do one thing, and to see that all of them are just right. Whether I willingly received this gift or not is another matter, but that was the gift offered me.

In Hampi, through dear Jyothi, I was shown the true meaning of forbearance. *Titiksha,* forbearance, is like fearlessness. It is one of those qualities that gives complete liberation when it is lived to its limit.

Then at Biligiri-Ranga, I was able to face anger and accept contradiction. Being able to embrace what is given—without trying to change it—is also quite a perfect gift.

During my month at Kumbakonam, I received so many gifts. The Kauveri River showed me the detachment inherent in the flow of LIFE. Ram Sadhu taught me to appreciate the LIFE that surrounds me. The true understanding of LIFE will culminate when eventually my awareness expands to comprehend that LIFE within me. Siva RamaKrishna initiated me into the wisdom of traditional India and its *Gayatri Mantra.*

Although I experienced a most precious peace in many settings, the culmination was my stay at Shantivanam, Father Bede’s Forest of Peace. Back in Pondy, I feel quite successful in my capacity to be in peace. Because of the more hectic environment, at first I could only hear the silence between blurbs of noise. As I remained alert, I began to sense the peace in spite of the noise. A deep silence is indeed spread upon the earth. The silence is always there; we could not even hear the noise if it were not for that

poignant silent background.

I feel so blessed to know the peace of divine birthright—something born in our own hearts. A peace that is bought with material wealth, a peace that is fought for with weapons, a peace that is exacted through total control is not true peace at all. Even if it were peace, how long could it last? Until the car gets a dent, until the enemy gets a new weapon, until someone has the courage to speak out.

True peace will only be found in our hearts. It is always there, yet there will never be the right time or place or circumstances for it to show itself. For true peace is not dependent on time or place or circumstances. It's not dependent on anything; it's a no-thing phenomenon. *It just is.*
A common prayer from the Vedas is for peace and prosperity for everyone:

> *Praise be to all the kings who protect all their subjects*
> *with full vigor and with righteous justice;*
> *May the Brahmans and cows prosper;*
> *May all the populace be ever happy.*
> *May the rain fall always at the appropriate time,*
> *so that the fields are full of ripe grain.*
> *May this country be always free from agitation and disturbance.*
> *May the Brahmans be without fear* [to speak the truth].

I always have to take a deep breath when I read those last two lines. For eons the *Brahmans* and sages have prayed for the welfare of this country, yet no country has been as ravaged by invasion. The prayers simply did not work. Perhaps if everyone on the planet had been repeating that same prayer, then it could have been different in India. Had Bharata flourished and evolved in its natural culture, I think it could have made a difference for everyone on the planet. Prayer did fail on the external level, but an internal strength be present for the culture and religion to have endured through it all.

Even if the Indians turn from their own *dharma* (rules of righteousness), the ideas of their ancient *rshis* will persist; they are universal. We can never lose that knowledge, for, according to the *rshis,* human being has two birthrights: his innate divinity and the inborn knowledge of the Vedas that accompanies that divinity. Anyone who sits in silent alertness long enough will indeed rediscover the fount of knowledge called the Vedas. We are one; we are all "children of light."

One day, I am inspired to rewrite the Vedic prayer for modern times. My version goes like this:

> *May everyone be happy,*
> *May everyone be peaceful,*
> *May everyone be prosperous,*
> *May everyone of us use our talents wisely for*
> *our own evolution and for the benefit of others.*
> *May my body and mind remain strong and healthy,*
> *so that I may serve my family, my community,*
> *and humanity faithfully until the end of my days.*

May we Children of Light realize our true birthright.

Chapter Thirty-three

THE QUEST CONTINUES

I have been traveling in the land of the “children of light” for over a year now. Since my life quest is to find out if there is meaning and purpose to life, my experiences here have presented me with much food for thought—much more than I could get in a lifetime of living in the U.S.

Last year, I explored the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, which I consider to be the areas where the traditions of Indian life are more authentic. However, summers are a challenge there, so I plan to visit other parts of Bharata, a land given the name “India” by her foreign invaders. Many distinct cultural realities are scattered through the broad plains and the Himalayan Mountains that make up northern India. Even though, in the cities, the people and customs have noticeably adapted to accommodate the rule of foreigners—first the Muslim Afghans andTurks, then the European British and Portuguese. However, there are still villages where you will find yourself outside historical time. There the calendar page has not been turned for hundreds of years.

During my journey, I have had a variety of experiences: some were up, and some were down, and some were downright puzzling, but, I can assure you, “in the middle” is a rare occurrence here. In spite of some real challenges, somehow I am still in a good place mentally and physically, so I am impelled to explore more in my quest for understanding my self and my world. Although the aspects of my inner journey always remain as a mental backdrop impelling me onward, at times it seems I am just learning to look at the external world with a new mindset. At other times I think it is sheer curiosity that keeps me going. An inconceivable cauldron of color, chaos and creepy crawlies, India presents many opportunities to distract one off any purpose. Many times, I seem to move with my next inspiration without any definite plan, for I imagine many realities just awaiting my presence to unfold before my eyes.

Certainly, one thing that fascinates me is that all aspects of humanity still exist here. Bharata is her peoples, their unique customs, rituals and ideas. Egypt is the archeological site of the physical monuments of humankind, but India is the archeological site of the human mind. The possibility of unique experiences in this varied country is endless. For the mental world is their domain of expertise.

Since time immemorial, the *modus operandi* of the Indian literate has been the quest for freedom, not political, but real internal, intrinsic freedom. Enlightenment, they call it. It’s a state of mind, that, obviously, is without race, age or gender. Even their Supreme Being, the impersonal Brahman, is expressed grammatically in Sanskrit in the neuter gender. This aspiration for freedom without material distinctions has given their religion a flexibility that has bestowed Bharata with many unique sages, including women, from the Vedic period right up to modern times.

The first time I went to India, I had not even heard the word “enlightenment.” I was in my early thirties, yet I had come to the end of my life. Not in a negative sense, but the truth is I had done everything I had ever wanted to do and possessed everything I ever wanted to have. Really, more than I ever imagined, for somehow, I had never dreamt big dreams.

My realization at that time in my life was not a question, it was a statement: “This is all there is.” I honestly tried to live with this knowledge constantly rumbling and tumbling on the tip of my mind. I was living a totally normal life in every respect, but I was not comfortable internally. But I saw no other alternative. I kept telling myself, “This is all there is, so deal with it.” Somehow I could not.

At that time I was living in California. The possibility of raising one's consciousness, or better still, obtaining cosmic consciousness, was in the air. Any weekend of the month, you could attend a seminar that promised instant transformation. Exotic *gurus* and *yogis* were drifting through San Francisco. I would go and listen to their talks, but they were either pretty simplistic or too far-fetched. So my first true teacher turned out to be an American, Brandon Poso. He had created a seminar series geared to experiencing one's "I am-ness." The second weekend was a true breakthrough experience for me. In a flash of insight, I saw my small, limited mind on an infinite ocean of possibility. I realized that, although I had everything I could ever want, one thing was still missing: human experience.

My first foray into the great, wide world of experience was to live in Spain where I attended the University of Madrid. I spent an incredible year of opening myself to love and life. I faced the world alone; I traveled alone; I even ate alone. And I was never really alone, for everywhere I went I connected with delightful people. Young people, both Americans and Europeans, who were also traveling, were so open to life. I found older Europeans were gentle and wise in ways that elderly Americans were not. I loved the Spanish people; they taught me a lot about human dignity and enjoying life. As I admired this many-faceted humanity funneling through my life, I began to wonder what it would mean to be a complete human being. I kept feeling that opening myself to experiencing as many realities as possible was a key. That year in Spain was the prelude to a travel lust that has sustained me through my quest for experiencing Life—for twenty years now.

When I returned to the San Francisco Bay area from Madrid, I really felt out of my element. The world around me seemed so sterile and lifeless. About that time, I met an Indian Swami who spoke perfect English, was incredibly intelligent, yet was quite charming. From the first time I listened to Swami Chinmayananda speak, I knew he had discovered something that I wanted. When he gave his philosophy lectures, he lit up like Times Square. I watched the way he enjoyed whatever he did, and I was fascinated. How could someone get such joy out of simple things? To me he appeared to be enveloped in his own bright fresh world for which our normal material world was only a dull horizon.

In speaking with him, I found out he had an organization in India that sponsored some charitable projects. I was looking for new experiences, so I thought that I might be useful there. I booked a flight on a four-month excursion fare-for a trial period. No sooner had I arrived, I found that the Swami had different plans for me. I was propelled on a whirlwind tour of an inconceivable unique world. While the Swami traveled on a lecture tour from one end of India to the other, I tagged along—eyes wide open and mind agape.

I was listening to lectures on the texts of the philosophical branch of Hinduism, called Vedanta, or "the end of knowledge," meaning the ultimate truth. My mind lit up with the wonderful new concepts of god, man and the world. In short, the Swami was teaching me to think for myself. This was real stuff that I could cogitate on and start making sense of my world. Looking back, I realize I was never very good at swallowing another's ideas anyway. I always wanted to figure out things for myself.

Then there was that strange quirk that I first noticed when I was about twelve. I could somehow tell when someone was lying, not about little everyday things, but about the big important issues. My mind would get all sticky, as if a big sharp thorn would emerge, with time it would try to rub and work its way to the real truth of the matter.

The first time I became aware of this tendency I was in a Bible study class. The preacher went off on a tangent about heaven and hell. He finished it off with an off-hand comment about the misfortune of the Jews who would not go to heaven. My mind got very, very sticky. I knew he did not speak the truth, but I did not know why it was not true.

So the thorn kept quietly rubbing in my brain, impelling me to figure it out. Obviously, the Jews did not ask to be born to a Jewish family, so if God put Jews in a Jewish family, he was the one condemning them to hell. Several years later, Gertrude Stein informed me through her writing that actually the word "hell" never appears in the Old Testament. Better still, I figured, the preacher was right: the Jews would

not go to hell because there wasn't one. Then when I was sixteen I heard Billie Graham claim that he could scare people into heaven. Lots of stickiness clamored over my brain on that one. Heaven is full of a bunch of people afraid of a hell that I had figured out did not exist, soI dismissed the hell thing.

But there were other issues. I confess I was one of those who asked where Cain and Abel got their wives in my Sunday School class. Any why didn't someone edit the four resurrection stories to make them consistent? And how was Jesus from the lineage of David if Joseph wasn't his father. Everyone got sticky when I asked those questions. All this sticky stuff just kept adding up and simmering in the back of my mind. Anytime I got a new fragment of relevant information, it just pegged in on top of the big batch of stickers. Sometimes giving a new order to the heap. Sometimes giving more light. Sometimes making more shadows.

With the Swami's daily lectures and discussions, my mind was being replowed and reseeded with great new ideas. I began to comprehend the concepts of reincarnation, yoga, *karma* and *dharma* in their true sense—not the watered-down American version. For example, we Christians use the word *karma* to mean retribution. Actually, *karma* means action, work, activity—the very stuff of life. When an Indian says *karma* he simply means his own job. The sages use it to mean the action that makes the world go round. The dance of the creation is activity in all its manifestations, so technically there is no fault involved in suffering—it is a balancing act. Cogitating on these ideas, I started seeing more bright spots between the thorny brambles in my brain.

The other force of change on my mind was subtler. There is nothing like a strange environment to experience a change in consciousness. When the mind gets so much new input that it cannot figure things out—it just stands still. In India, foreigners may have the experience in a train station, a marketplace, or along a crowded road. Whereas, Indians may have the same experience when they see the orderly traffic in an American city. With this new frame of mind—just quietly observing the present time—the old stickers no longer seemed so big, at least not as important.

Then one bright day my mind was blown away. . . for less than an hour, but it sure changed my perceptions about life. Until that time I had been living a ninety per cent unconscious life—sifting through what came to me, enjoying and keeping what I liked, rejecting what I did not like, not really thinking about any rhyme nor reason in my life. Now I was forced to consider that there was a reality, I guess you would call it a spiritual side of life, that I had never even imagined. Exactly what is spiritual, and what is Life, and what is a spiritual life? All these concepts were new puzzles to be chomped on by my brain for years to come.

However, at the time of that experience, due to the peaceful mind that accompanied it, I did not consider all these ramifications. They would be questions I would live with, then forget, then be reminded of, then forget again, then consider, then forget, then reconsider. The answers never came in a straight line.

Ten years had passed and I still had not really understood what had happened to me. I did understand the experience was a change of consciousness, although, obviously, not a permanent one. Even so, it would always have some meaning in the background of my life. I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that we humans can experience a unique level of consciousness. Clearly, we are continually attempting to do so. Just because we chose the easier routes of alcohol, drugs, sex, dance, adventure, instead of a mystical path, does not mean that we do not want the same result: to view ourselves and our world from a different perspective.

When I returned to U.S. nearly two years later, no matter how I arranged my life, my time was always overbooked with worldly concerns. I never found time to get down to the real issue of understanding who I really was—so many me's. How do the different me's connect? I kept feeling a need to have some major time to meditate, so I could come to a resolution and see things clearly. This was the principal impetus that brought me back to India. I wanted time to observe and think. Initially, my plan had been to live in an *ashram*, a spiritual community, dividing my time between meditation, studying (particularly Sanskrit) and doing some community service.

When that plan did not work, I decided to visit various *ashrams* and places of natural beauty. I even had in the back of my mind that I could write a guide on spiritual communities that were off the beaten track. Also, while traveling, I was always talking to Indians from every region, culture and inclination. From these interactions, I gathered many details to augment my fascination for seeing the world with a different mindset. In other words, in my travels, I was moving from a personal to a more general focus, one that continued to be more spontaneous and adventurous.

Chapter Thirty-four

ONE WOMAN'S LEGACY

My first stop on my journey north is an important one: an ashram community founded by a woman whom I truly admire. I had the good fortune to spend the summer of 1979 with her in a retreat in the Himalayas. Swamini Sharada Priyananda is definitely a role model of an enlightened being who has created her life to fit her talents. Endowed with extraordinary energy and intellectual insight, she has dedicated her life to serving humanity in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Although ten years have passed since I was with her in the Himalayas, I still hold a vivid memory of those wonderful days filled with long spiritual discussions, meditation, great hikes and lots of laughter.

She now resides in a small village, and villages are the heartbeat of India. Statistics report that at least seventy-five percent of the population still lives in these rural hamlets scattered throughout the countryside. Here's where you will find the real India. However, each geographic area has its own unique culture, so the rural populace is impossible to stereotype.

Andhra, as it is commonly called, is one of the largest states, covering a big portion of central India that reaches to the Indian Ocean. In my past travels, I have spent very little time in Andhra, so I am looking forward to exploring it. First mentioned in the historical records of 230 BC, Andhra is quite unique in that it has been an important domain in every Indian dynasty.

In the first centuries of the Common Era, the Buddhist had huge monastic centers here. Later, South Indian Dravidians built important temples in several areas. Even though they eventually lost in the fourteenth century, a strong Hindu *Ksatriya,* warrior, caste courageously battled it out against the encroachment of the Moguls for centuries. By the time the Afghan Muslims beat the Moguls in the early eighteenth century, it was the largest and richest kingdom in India, and remained so until it was drafted into the Indian Republic in 1947. Never conquered by the British, nor favored by them, Hyderabad, Andhra's capital city, was avoided whenever possible, for the populace was so hostile to the European interlopers that they would openly spit in the "white faces." Even the young Winston Churchill switched from his favored horse to an elephant when he had to visit there, so he would be well above the confrontation zone.

When I reach the Cuddapah station in early afternoon, I have to find a bus for the small village where the Swamini (feminine form of swami) resides. However, her address, Ellayapalle, is such a small bump in the road that no one has heard of it. Finally, from the crowd that has gathered to concern themselves with my dilemma, a gentleman emerges who knows the Swamini. With his directions, soon I am on the bus that will take me to the Korlagunta stop. From there, they will be able direct me to Ellayapalle. (Believe me, all these names are difficult for me too!) In less than an hour, I am deposited along side the road at a path with several shacks. I am tempted to pause for tea, but think better of it when I see the disappearing sun. So following the path indicated by the local folk, I track down a dusty lane, lugging my suitcase along.

I make it just in time, for the twilight glow if fading just as I enter the gates of *Chinmayaranyam*, Forest of Chinmaya. I have read a lot of great press on the Swamini's creation here. Although Telugu is spoken instead of English, I have been eager to visit here. Quickly taking in the premises, I spot all the ashramites assembled in a large open hall for a class with the Swamini. Petromax lanterns are already fired up; no electricity is available tonight.

Although Swamini is an educated woman from the city of Hyderabad, she always knew she wanted to live in a rural setting. She is one of the few modern women who jumped to the renunciation stage of life immediately after receiving her law degree. Since life is meant for living, the Hindus have divided its experiences into four basic categories: 1) *brahmacharya,* student; 2) *grhasta,* householder; 3) *vanaprastha,* semi-retired life of contemplation; 4) *sannyasa,* taking of renunciation vows to become a swami/swamini.

Swamini had wanted to live in a peaceful, unpolluted environment, yet she also aspired to be in a situation where she could be of service to a rural community. Even when we were in Himalayas, Swamini was hoping for an ashram to settle in. Finally, it has all come together as she had dreamed. Being a renunciate, she could not pick and choose, but was totally dependent on others for a donation of land, which turned out to be twenty-four acres beside the tiny village of Ellayapalle.

The only stone in the rice, as we say here, is that this village is in the hottest, driest area of Andhra, which has got to be India's hottest, driest state. Nevertheless, the Swamini's cheerful attitude, inexhaustible energy, and ability to inspire others have managed to create a miracle in the desert.

The Swamini is respected throughout the state as an authentic teacher of spiritual knowledge, although the villagers here call her "Mother." A fascinating aspect of the Hindu religion is the number of women saints and sages found here throughout history. Although most of the women have been the devotional, contemplative types, whom I call saints, the culture has also produced a number of feminine intellects, or sages. In particular, three stories stand out in my mind. These women are all mentioned in ancient texts that predate modern Hinduism.

The great *rishi* Yagnavakya, author of the most ancient and terse *Upanisad,* had two wives, Maitreya and Kalyani. Maitreya was acknowledged to be a knower of the Ultimate Knowledge--even by her *rshi* husband. Another female sage in that era was Gargi, also known to be an enlightened master. She is referred to in the Vedas as a member of an assembly of learned sages who were responsible for testing Yagnavakya's spiritual understanding.

Another example comes from the lengthy text *Yoga Vasishta,* which tells of an enlightened queen. The story goes that King Shikidhvaja and his Queen Chudaalaa together inquired into the Knowledge of the Divine Self. The wife was the first to understand the Truth and even gained certain supernatural powers. Although the husband was pleased with the attainments of his spouse, he was disappointed with his own progress. In order to further his development, he went to the forest for a spiritual retreat. Evidently, sensing that the king would not want her as a spiritual teacher, Chudaalaa flew over to his hut in the guise of a hermit sage. She thus taught him and brought him to the understanding of the Ultimate Knowledge. Having achieved the supreme goal in life, the two liberated ones spent the night in conjugal delight. Well, that's what the text says. . . and it seems like a relevant point to me. Being enlightened evidently does not mean that you become a Mortimer Milk-toast. Or become impractical: this bliss scene was after Chudaalaa had tested her husband's loyalty by using her power to create celestial damsels to tempt him.

A similar story (minus the conjugal bliss ending) appears in the *Tripura Rahasya,* also an ancient text replete with stories of saints and sages. A prince, named Hemachuta, and his wife, Hemalekha, were inquiring into the Ultimate Knowledge. She understood the Truth, but somehow he could not figure it out. Only through the teaching of his wife was he finally able to comprehend the Highest Knowledge.

So the concept of enlightened women is not a new one in Bharata's history. I would say that from those early times through modern times, the women saints and sages have received excessive veneration from the populace. Therefore, the Swamini is not a pioneer in a women's spiritual movement, but a part of a long line of enlightened sages and saints.

When she moved here ten years ago, the first step was to locate water to create this little oasis. Several modern "bore" wells, as opposed to the usual open-pit wells, were dug here to provide both the ashram and local villagers with a year-round water supply. Then they began to plant dozens of native trees,

thereby converting the site into a huge garden. In addition, a fence of eucalyptus, sandalwood and clumps of lacy bamboo enclose the grounds. Shade trees and fruit trees—lots of mangos—line the paths that wind through the rustic cottages.

Summer arrives early here. Even though it is only the 1st of March, everything looks dry already. I am definitely confined to my "I came to a fork in the road and took the path well-shaded" mode. The shadows of the trees help, but I have learned to skirt the shady side of buildings and walls too.

The ashram community is a network of activities, with teaching being the major focus. I am able to join the classes that the Swamini gives to a group of young people. She is training them to go out to the various towns in Andhra to give discourses on the scriptures, as she has been doing for almost twenty-five years. Presently, about a dozen very intelligent and dedicated students are in different phases of their training as teachers. Although *brahmachari* means student, its most common usage is the term for a spiritual student, or novice. Technically, it means one who thinks continually of *Brahman,* the impersonal Supreme Being. A Sanskrit word often has several levels of meanings: one for the mundane world, and one for subtler realities. For example, the word for "bird" can also mean "mind," since it is prone to take off in flights of fancy.

In addition to the spiritual classes, a residential elementary school provides education for children whose parents want them to have a spiritual education along with the secular one. Traditionally, the upper-caste children left home at six years of age to live in the ashram of a *guru,* who taught them everything from spiritual treatises to methods of warfare. The *gurus* always had a wife, up to four wives, to assist in his service to the youth of his community.

I find that these energetic sprites with their bright smiles add a pleasant dynamic to the community. In the evening, just before sunset, all the children gather to chant verses from the scriptures for the Swamini. I wish I could describe the joy I feel in listening to these innocent voices chanting Vedic hymns. I am transported to a time when Life was true open flexible sacred. I breathe in these whispers of our ancient roots and feel whole. Surely, this quiet connected expanded feeling is an essential part of our humanness. I do not know how we all manage to function without daily awareness of it.

The ashram family is completed with a retirement home for the elderly. During her travels and lectures in Andhra Pradesh, the Swamini inspired many to honor their *vanaprastha* tradition by retiring to a spiritual community. Most of them choose to study the scriptural text along with the *brahmacharis.* Several of them help the *brahmacharis* with the spiritual classes for the children each evening. Others enjoy serving as grandparents to the youngsters by giving them attention and care. Several of the elders have fit in perfectly as the principal caregivers for an orphanage serving a half-dozen toddlers from the nearby villages. These retired people, many in their seventies, are living a full and meaningful life; how they feel about it clearly glows on their faces.

With the generous donations from businessmen in Andhra, the ashram is able to fund other charitable projects. The brahmacharis deliver food, *dal* (husked, dried beans), rice, and clothing to the elderly of the surrounding villages. It costs only $3.00 to feed one elderly villager for one month. Whereas, a donation of $10.00 feeds the entire ashram, including the school children, their mid-day meal.

The gathering for the noon meal is a highlight of the day. Everyone sits in the huge, open, thatched dining hall with the floor smeared with dried cow dung paste. It's considered an antibacterial, and I have to confess that I have never seen a single fly land it. We all sit in lines along the walls and across the floor. Of course, I have the seat of honor by the Swamini, but it turns out to be the "hot" seat.

As customary, a verse from Chapter Four of the *Bhagavad Gita* is chanted for grace:

> *Brahman* is the ladle,
> *Brahman* is the food;
> *Brahman* is partaker of food;
> *Brahman* is the digestive fire;
> Whoever sees *Brahman* in all actions attains *Brahman.*

Since there are about one hundred of us, and no one eats until everyone is served, we go on chanting the entire fourth chapter. Still not everyone has their food, so we start chanting other verses. Then the Swamini asks me to lead one.

“But I don’t know any verses,” I quickly explain.

“You did know some when we were in the Himalayas. You must have forgotten.”

When we were in Uttarkasi, the Swamini never understood that I never chanted a single line. I just looked at the book and mouthed along. Since Sanskrit is one of those sensible languages, like Spanish, that reads just as it looks, I could pronounce it correctly without knowing the meaning of words. On my first trip, I did study Sanskrit diligently whenever I had a chance because it is fascinating. Also, other Indian languages have many Sanskrit words, so it gives me an edge when I try to learn the basics of the vernaculars. So the fact remains, I can read Sanskrit—but not fast enough.

I am assigned a room in the section with the *brahmacharis*. We all have a small adobe cottage, topped by a thatched roof. The bathrooms are separate structures across a shady corridor. Three walls of the tiny cubicles are made of adobe, while the fourth one is only a woven screen, letting in light and fresh air. The airiness feels good in the heat of the summer; I suppose that there is never any cold weather here. The thatched roof is practical and allows for fresh air under the eaves; however, all the dry straw creates an ever-present fire hazard. Already there have been two serious fires here. One was caused when a scorpion stung one of the *brahmacharis*, causing him to drop a kerosene lantern. The flames were roaring before he even realized what had happened.

So one morning, the Swamini directs the setting up of an altar, so that the *brahmacharis* can perform a Vedic ritual. Then they start the chanting of ancient verses prescribed to protect one’s abode from fire. The *brahmacharis* continue chanting all day. I am sure that these rituals can make a difference, if done properly and with the right attitude—it’s the power of positive thinking, reinforced with the energy of millions of repetitions through the centuries.

I do know of a couple of successful cases. When I was in South India in 1979, the monsoon rains had failed to arrive on schedule. The priests started chanting the Vedic invocations to bring rain. And rain it did, such an inundation that they had to start looking up the verses to stop the rain. Another time when I was in the Himalayas, a U.S. satellite had gone astray. It was predicted that it would crash right into India. The priests, from one end of the country to the other, began chanting incantations for protection of the motherland. The satellite landed out at sea. Of course, the American engineers have another explanation.

The ashram and village have a mutual support system. The villagers provide the labor for the kitchen and gardens. Teen-age girls come over every day to fill the huge clay pots with clear water for bathing. Recently, a new program was started to replant a nearby hillside with trees. Several men are paid for watering a certain number. Since they only are paid if their allotment of trees remain alive, they have incentive to do the work.

In addition to providing income for the villagers, the ashram runs a school for the children. One morning, a *brahmachari* takes me over to tour the village and school. The hamlet of some 600 people is quite unusual, even picturesque. Eight-foot white-washed walls, which give as much shade as possible from the blazing sun, encircles each house. The wooden entrance gate in the front wall is painted and decorated with bright colors. Inside the fences, the spotless white houses are built of stone, made smooth with adobe, then white-washed. Stalls covered with thatch give shade to the cows and oxen in each compound. These people do not know what a mortgage payment is. Built entirely of local materials, the houses were constructed by the occupants with the help of their neighbors. In another area, I heard the men singing songs while they worked together carrying materials to erect a new house.

The children attend classes *gratis*. The villagers supplied the land, materials and labor to erect two large, open-air sheds that serve as classrooms. The ashram takes responsibility for supplying the teachers,

books and a midday meal. After I am introduced, the bright-eyed children sing a ballad in Telugu for me. They all seem to be vying to sing the loudest and best. I have visited many such classes, both high and low caste, throughout India, and I have never noticed a single, bashful child. They all seem so full of confidence and curiosity to meet the strange white lady.
One evening the villagers visit the ashram to dance for us, a simple circle dance. The majority of the performers are men of all ages, with only the youngest girls and elderly women joining in. Predictably, only five minutes into the performance, the power goes out. The petromax lanterns are quickly lit. They do produce a fanciful setting, but not enough light to really see the folk dance well.

Daily life is gentle and effortless here. I watch the villagers as they take their cows out to forage, bundle rice straw to make a thatched roof, and work in the kitchen. Everyone has a duty, knows that duty, and seems content. Momentarily, I forget that there is another world out there where everyone is struggling and competing for survival. I wonder, why don't these people, who have so little, appear to be struggling?

On the weekend we have a break from our normal routine, as we are invited for a special feast in the nearby town. Only the affluent can afford to arrange for such an occasion. I understand we are celebrating the son's birthday. This will be my very first journey in an ox-cart, actually called a "bullock-cart" here. Fortunately (in Andhra only), the carts are covered, rather like our covered wagons of yore. Off we go, early, so we can reach the house by lunch time.

During our three hour journey, cars and buses give way as we plod along the highway. We have a great time, bumping along, singing, bumping along, laughing, with lots more bumping along. The *brahmacharis* want me to teach them some English songs—not necessarily religious ones. I start with "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream; merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily—life is but a dream."

"You see, we Americans have our philosophical tradition too!" I tease them.

On the return trip, we have to stop and wait for two hours at a railroad crossing. The automatic bars lower when the train is scheduled to arrive, not being programmed to take in consideration that today the train is hours late. Time, the Indians have lots of time, plenty of time to spare for waiting two hours at a railroad crossing. Not a soul is complaining; everyone is patiently waiting. They seem to think there is nothing anyone can do. Yet, I somehow know this is not the first time the train has been late.

The Swamini is realistic about my ability to endure the intense heat that is descending on us, for it's going to get much worse before the June rains come. I am perpetually bathed in sweat. Even though I bathe three times a day, I never feel any real relief. The overhead fan would have been a great help, but the power is always off when I need it. One small compensation though: it's too hot for mosquitoes. Somehow I can take sleeping in a pool of sticky sweat, or being dive-bombed by mosquitoes, but the gods have thus far saved me from having to endure both at the same time. It's divine dispensation for the *angrezhi*, an English-speaking foreigner.

In spite of all her responsibilities, Swamini is determined that I will receive teachings from a major philosophical text of Vedanta while I am here. The chosen text, a favorite of mine, tells of Nachiketas, a young boy who defies a god. Ancient Indians are accused of having written no history, but that is not really true, for glimpses of their way of life is sprinkled through all their epics and even their philosophical treatises. The *Katha Upanisad* is no exception.

In line with Hindu traditions, the young boy's father, a *Brahman* priest, was performing his last worldly duty of giving away all his worldly wealth, thereby insuring himself a place in heaven. While Nachiketas' was observing the ritual, he happened to note that dear old Dad was holding back his best cows, and was only giving away the old and decrepit ones. Being a priest's son, he knew the scriptures: those who are miserly in their giving go to joyless regions after death.

Clearly upset at what he was witnessing, the boy cleared his throat, cast his eyes to the ground, then asked his father in the softest of tones, "So to whom will you give me?"

When the father ignored the obvious censure, the boy asked again, “Father, who will I go to?” Still no answer was forthcoming.

So it was only his third try that prompted an answer from his enraged father, “You, you go to Lord Death.” The father cursed the son with “go to the devil,” as they say in Spanish, or our equivalent of “go to hell.”

The son remained poised, for a father is a child’s first *guru* (teacher); therefore, his words could not have been spoken in vain. “Gee, Dad wants me to go to visit Lord Death. I wonder what good can come out of this?” Nachiketas thinks to himself. With that thought, he journeys off to the nether world. Nachiketas was quite clever, when he reached the abode of Lord Yama (one in control), he did not miss the chance to question the imposing demigod who knows both this world and the other. Because of the boy’s interrogations, Lord Death revealed the wisdom that has been treasured for centuries in the philosophical treatise, *Katha Upanishad.*

Of course, since reincarnation is a tenet of the Asian religions, they have a totally different attitude about death than the Christian/Islam idea of “one chance is all you get.” The Jains and Hindus even practice self-euthanasia by refusing to take food or water when they know the time has come that they can no longer take care of themselvs and will be a burden to others.

For some reason, I have always felt an affinity with Nachiketas and his wonderful optimism. Often, when life deals me a challenge, I remember his words, “so what good can some out of this?” Surely, if he could take advantage of a trip to hell to gain wisdom for humanity, I can derive some small benefit from my minuscule trials.

Although I love it here, for it is exactly and perfectly the environment that I would create for myself if I were an Indian teacher, my lack of Telugu limits my ability to integrate successfully into the ashram. When I tell the Swamini of my idea of trekking up the Godavari River, she discloses that she knows nothing of that part of Andhra. However, she does give me several suggestions of places of natural beauty to check out, including an ashram she has personally visited. Since it is near the sea, she assures me the climate will be cooler.

As I bid the Swamini good-bye, she warns me, “Take the first bus that will stop for you. Don’t wait for the Tirupati bus as you can wait for hours. Once you get to Kodur, there are plenty of buses from there.” It was not only a warning, but also a forecast: how do the people endure this kind of public transportation?

Chapter Thirty-five

BOUNTIFUL NATURE

One of the places *Swamini* suggested I visit is an outstanding bird sanctuary near Vijayawada. For me, being in bountiful nature is a sure route to a peaceful mind and a connection with something other than my small self. Truly, I just love observing all the lovely creatures in our world. The myriad of manifestations in the creation is incredible; I do not want to miss anything.

Since the sanctuary is only an overnight journey, I decide to stop and check it out. However, when I arrive in Kaikalur, I am not at my best after a sleepless night from the loud clacking of the train wheels. In a semi-somnolent state, I approach the station master where I commence with the first step of frustration that I always seem to have to endure when I arrive in a new rural place. After explaining that I have come to visit the bird sanctuary, I ask if there is a tourist department here. No, he seems sure there is not. After some discussion in Telugu with the ticket seller and others who are hanging around, they decide I should go to the Forest Office. There I will be sure to find the information I want. One of the men kindly volunteers to tell the rickshaw driver where to take me, so I hop aboard.

After only a few blocks, we enter the main road. The driver looks back at me and gestures "which way." I shrug—I thought he was supposed to know where we are going. So he chooses to make a left onto the main road. After a half block, he turns back again and says something that sounds exactly like "Post Office."

Oh, dear—"Hold it," I bark. Everyone understands those words. Then I flag down an intelligent looking, well-dressed gentleman passing on a bike. We clarify for the rickshaw driver that I want the Forest Office, not the Post Office. Problem is, as ascertained by the group who has suddenly gathered to consider the situation, there is no Forest Department in Kaikalur. To complicate things, a young police officer approaches me and demands, not asks for, but demands, my papers. As I am dragging out my Passport and Visa, which is a 9" x 12" flimsy piece of paper, everyone's attention is diverted to looking it over. Meanwhile, I am still trying to get intelligent directions from the gentleman I flagged down because he is the only one who speaks English.

The policeman keeps asking me, "What are you doing here?"

I keep replying, "I am here to see the lake."

He repeats my words, "I am here to see the lake"; then asks me again, "What are you doing here?"

While this parrot-act is going on, my only ally starts to take off.

"Sir, you don't have any idea where I can get information about touring Kolleru Lake bird sanctuary?"

With that, everyone reconvenes and discusses the real issue, but, of course, I cannot understand their Telugu. On second thought, haven't I learned by now? I better verify that I am in the right place because I have seen no indication of any lake anywhere. When I ask, "Just where is the lake?" they all point out a billboard, made of metal. It is so corroded by rust that not one word is legible. A streak of bright blue visible across the bottom gives me a faint hope that there may be water somewhere near.

Finally, the unanimous decision is made to send me over to the Irrigation Department. They will surely

have information about the lake. I retrieve my papers from the policeman, who is still asking me, “What are you doing here?”

Is he a messenger from the gods trying to keep me on track? Nancy, what ARE you doing here?

With the new instructions, the driver turns around and takes off in the opposite direction. The Irrigation Department was a good suggestion, for there I meet Sri Venkateshwara Rao, Deputy Executive Engineer of Irrigation. I am quite amazed to find a high official sitting at his desk at 8:15 in the morning. My luck may be changing, for this is surely a once in a lifetime boon. A local joke is that during Indira’s Emergency, when everyone was compelled to appear for work, there weren’t enough chairs for all the government employees to sit down. As it turns out, Mr. Rao was on the same train that I arrived on this morning. He had come straight to the office—that explains the rare event.

A robust man with a bushy salt and pepper mustache, Mr. Rao immediately takes on the role of the perfect Indian host. A guest has arrived and the whole office will be at a standstill until my needs are met. Just like the people I encountered in the street, everyone has time to help a foreigner. First, he pays the rickshaw driver. Then tea appears, followed by breakfast wrapped in a banana leaf that doubles as a plate.

While I am eating breakfast, Mr. Rao and I discuss my situation. No, there is no suitable accommodation whatsoever in Kaikalur. Gradually, the room fills up with three engineers and four peons; all totally focused on my dilemma. When Mr. Rao orders another cup of tea for me, half of the peons bolt for the door to serve me.

By now, we have made the minor orientations necessary to tune our ears to each other’s English accent, so Mr. Rao and I are communicating without difficulty. The sum of the predicament is that there are no hotels here. In addition, there are no boats available to see the lake. The Irrigation Department had some row boats, but they have all sunk.

“That’s the problem in India, no maintenance; they won’t spend the money,” he laments.

“But doesn’t it cost more to replace the equipment, than maintain it?” I somehow remain my naive, logical self, but many such encounters are surely whittling away at it.

“But this is the time-honored way in India. Everything is always going to rust, don’t disturb it,” he explains with a chuckle.

Since his foremost duty is to entertain the guest, Mr. Rao starts telling me of the importance of one British official in this region. The official had engineered a dam across the Godavari River with a complex irrigation project that converted this District into some of the richest agricultural land in Andhra Pradesh. A coconut palm from this area just made the news: almost one thousand coconuts on one tree! Now revered as a saint by the local populace, they even held a centennial celebration and invited the engineer’s family to come from England to attend. However, he did not fare so well with the British Government of his day. They thought he had spent too much money on the natives and sacked him.



Bountiful coconut palm

“As a result of his work, this District has always paid more taxes than all the adjoining Districts put together.”

“So I guess the government’s message was you don’t spend money to help the peons pay more taxes.”

“Of course, that was his idea: Make the people prosper; then everyone will benefit, even the tax collector. Before they had the irrigation project, this was a poverty-stricken area.”

Finally, one of the telephone calls pays off, for they have located a young man working with Kolleru Lake Development. Within ten minutes he arrives on his motorcycle. Anjaneyulu informs us that I am in luck, an important official from the Forest Department is arriving tomorrow and several graduate students are also coming from Hyderabad University. The officials are to be given the complete tour of the lake, so a boat will have to be available for them. Certainly, they will be able to accommodate me also—after all, I am the guest.

The problem of seeing the lake solved, we proceed to the difficulty of finding a place for me to stay. Again Mr. Rao and his staff take on the responsibility with gusto. After a couple of phone calls, he obtains permission for me to stay at the Irrigation Department guest house out on the main canal. However, that brings up a new challenge: transportation out to the site. Mr. Rao remains undaunted. Three or four phone calls later he has located an employee who has some work in that area. He agrees to carry me on the back of his motor scooter. (This was when I learn the difference between a motorcycle and a motor scooter.)

The journey was memorable. The term “road” is a generous one, as most of the asphalt has been washed away, leaving only a strip one or two feet wide for much of the journey. I am holding on for dear life, especially at the horrific bumps of six inches getting on and off the asphalt. So with avoiding chuckholes and passing vehicles, we spend most of our time on the bumpy gravel shoulder. To get a break, I signal

for him to stop at a tea stall ahead where I spot a stalk of bananas dangling above the counter. My teeth chattering like automatic jackhammers, I try to catch my breath while I dig coins out of my bag with sticky, shaky fingers. After a cup of tea and fortifying myself with a banana, gritting my teeth and breathing deeply, I board the back of the scooter and am whisked off again. It was a trip not to repeat.

The guest house is truly a respite, complete with air conditioning. The British had interests in this area because of the lake for sport fishing and water for irrigation, so they had built this cottage some 100 years ago. It certainly contradicts the "no-maintenance-in-India" premise, for it is like new. Even the toilet flushes on the first try. I think that's a first in rural India. Since all guest houses are equipped with a cook, my lunch is ready and waiting when I arrive even though it's late afternoon.

A few days later when I get a chance, I go over to the Irrigation Department to thank Mr. Rao for arranging my stay at the comfortable guest house.

"Well, the Irrigation Department sure has not denied themselves on their guest house. I will have to eat my words about no maintenance in India," I mention.

He chuckles and looks down, "Well, you see, it was a real dump, but last year a central government Minister came here for inspection. It was the only place we could accommodate him and his entourage. So they totally redid the whole house from top to bottom, including paint, light fixtures, tile in the bath, and all new furniture."

"And I suppose the minister stayed one night."

"Yes, one night. But we just don't have any decent hotels here. We had to put him up somewhere."

Evidently this is a common scenario in democratic India that has never totally opted for socialism or capitalism. I doubt there will ever be a legitimate debate on the subject since the socialistic system serves the government officials so well. I recently read an informative article in a newspaper comparing expenditures in the public and private sector in coal mining in Bihar. The Tisco coal mines are held by a private firm, and give it a healthy annual profit. Last month when the owner, J.R.D. Tata, went for inspection, he arrived alone. Only the chief executive went to meet him. They held the necessary meetings, and Tata left the next day. Official business expenditure was under 3,000 rupees.

In contrast, the another coal mine in Bihar, publicly owned under the socialistic government control, continually operate at a loss. Last month when a Government Minister visited the mines, he arrived with his personal entourage (a hangover from the days of the kings), plus over a hundred clerks, officials and peons. At the factory, everyone from the stock boy to the top man had to be at the beck and call of the Minister and his staff; that is, absolutely no usual work was accomplished that week. Lavish lunches, dinners, teas were served up daily for the occasion. The total expenditure to taxpayers was estimated at 200,000 rupees. That's socialism Indian-style.

Next morning, I take the bus back into town. Not a joy ride, but I know the alternative; I give thanks for every bump that I am not enduring on a motor scooter. As soon as I reach town I go directly to the Kolleru Development offices where I meet Anjaneyulu and Meerab, a graduate student from Hyderabad. Even though I was specifically told to be here early, the reason I was to arrive early never becomes apparent. It's a repeat of yesterday's scenario; everyone in the office just circles round and round the guest, intent on entertaining me and making me comfortable.

A couple of hours and four cups of tea later, progress is forthcoming. At 10:00 a.m., we go for breakfast at a local cafe. We leisurely consumed a special breakfast of delicious pancakes made of ground mung beans that I had never seen before—or after. So when we finally do make it to the lake, the scorching high noon sun is awaiting us. At the gate, we stop to talk to several Forest Officers from the surrounding areas who are standing out in the sweltering heat, awaiting the arrival of the Official—the one who is supposed to provide us with a boat. They may have to wait all day. These hierarchical customs are remnants of the kowtowing the natives were required to make during the British Raj and have nothing to

do with caste. Why have the formalities continued after the British went home?—I am impertinent enough to wonder.

Although I arrived in what is normally the season to view the birds that annually migrate here for the winter, for no apparent reason, the majority took off for their Siberian homeland last week. I will miss several rarities like the great crested grebe, night heron, the painted stork and several rare ibises. Frankly, the lake is still so full of birds I am wondering where the migrants managed to squeeze in.

I am only viewing one small fork of the lake that is India's largest fresh water lake. It is actually a series of canals, streams and rivulets, interspersed with some fifty islands. The three of us hike around the piece of lake nearest the proposed tourist area. Fortunately, a few sprawling trees give us some shade. Anjaneyulu (Anji, for short) has spent two years in Kolleru working on his doctorate, so he knows every bird and exactly where to find it. We see an abundance of small grebes, ducks, herons, egrets, janacas, and moor hens, including the colorful purple variety.
In the afternoon, someone did find a country boat. They are hollowed from the trunk of a toddy palm, the tree favored for nesting by the gray pelican. Presently, the trees are being depleted by the natives who cut them to make boats for the poaching of the birds for food, particularly the plump moor hens. The shortage of the nesting palms caused the pelicans to move elsewhere about a dozen years ago. One movement in an ever-present flux of adjustment for survival apparent in all the life forms here, whether animal or human.

The highlight of this jaunt is a huge flock of openbill storks. They happen to be the subject of Meerab's doctorate studies. Here again there is an ecological problem due to depletion of resources. The stork's bill was adapted for eating a certain type of fresh-water snail, which was plentiful in Kolleru. However, the local women have started raising ducks for eggs to be exported to China. Besides what the ducks forage, the children go out to hunt additional snails to feed them. We see piles of empty snail shells around several villages, a sign that the openbill storks will soon lose their food source at Kolleru and will have to move to another territory also.

To solve the no hotel dilemma, Anji invites Meerab and me to stay at his place. Ordinarily, he could not have invited Meerab. It would not be proper to have a young woman in his home, but now I can play the role of chaperon. Personally, I am delighted to stay with these intelligent, informed young people. Also, these encounters always give me a rare opportunity to get a closer inspection of their ideas and opinions about life. Usually when Meerab visits here, she has to sleep on the floor at the office. Mama, the cleaning woman, stays with her. I do not know how she got the name, since "Mama" means "uncle" in her native language, but she waits on Meerab and me as if she has nothing else to do.

Mama's little mud shack is just across the street from the office. She and her husband came here from Kerala some years ago. Living quite happily on the proceeds of a small tea shop, they were even able to purchase a house. Then misfortune hit when her husband became gravely ill. With doctor and hospital bills, plus not being able to work to keep the cash flowing, they lost their home and shop. When he finally died, she had not a "pi" (a penny) to her name. She found the cleaning job, then friends helped her build a hut on the easement between the road and a walled compound.

"It was a nice little hut," she tells us, "but the police came one night and tore it down. I was so frightened, and so distraught over losing my pretty little hut that I decided not to rebuild it. Now I don't have to worry about them tearing down this crummy hut of sticks and mud. If they do, I can put it back up in a day."

In spite of the presence of a chaperon and plenty of room, Anji still takes the precaution of sleeping at his neighbor's home to allay any gossip. Throughout my travels even though I continually hear stories, I still find it hard to appreciate the man/woman rules in India. And they are numerous, for each area and caste has its differnt idiosyncrasy.

When Meerab and I question one of Anji's cohorts about his prospects with women, Subir confesses that he is madly in love with one of the professors at Hyderabad University. So madly in love that he even got up his nerve and touched her—on the hand. She was so astonished, and so shamed, at this terrible act

that she told her entire class what a terrible thing the student-teacher had done. She even threatened to report him to the authorities; he would have lost his job.
“You would have lost your job because you touched a woman's hand?” I beg Subir for clarification.

“Oh, yes, definitely; without question.”

“But was it just an accidental brush or did you actually plan to touch her hand?”

“Oh, yes. That was a well-planned hand touch, Nancyji, and don’t you doubt it,” he turns red with embarrassment, “but I made it look like an accidental brush.”

“I see. Now you have ruined all your chances with her?”

“I never had a chance with her, anyway. My mother will arrange my marriage with a village girl. She doesn’t want me to marry an educated woman who has a career. She will find a girl from the same village I grew up in, who can’t speak a word of English and only wants to cook and have children.”

“Your education will help you get the best girl in the village with the biggest dowry, yet having an education is held against a woman. Hardly seems fair, does it?” I venture to observe.

On the other hand, Anji has a “different” story for us. Until a few weeks ago, he had a roommate who had come to Kaikalur to make his fortune in the booming fish business. He ended up not making any money because he harvested too soon and the fish were too small. However, that was not his biggest problem: she was tall, dark and bright-eyed. He was madly in love with her, and they were actually cohabiting. He even introduced her to his best friend and business partner. Once while the fiancé was away in Hyderabad, “those two began to have some fun” as Anji put it. Well, finally the two male friends found out about each other’s escapades with the same woman. There was a terrible fight; they would never be friends again. And who got the girl? A third fellow, she married him within a month after the fight.

My intention has been to stick to the backroads of India where life remains simple and true to itself. Even though, Kaikalur is certainly off the beaten track, the conflicts between the old and new, and the impact of a capitalist economy is being played out here in living color.

The following afternoon, we drive over to the other side of the lake to have access to a motor boat, although the awaited Forest Department official never showed up. The only reason Meerab had here come was to support Anji in guiding the officer around the lake, so he can see some of the larger ecological problems here. Although for her it was a wasted trip, it is an advantage for me to have this vibrant intelligent young woman as a guide.

As we stand in the shade of a canopy, the boat slowly maneuvers up and down the deep canals that constitute the circulatory system of the lake. Many of the islands are nothing but mounds of mud covered with a type of reed that the natives use as thatch for roofs. Lots of weaver birds have picked these isolated reeds for their nests. We spot three varieties of kingfishers, including the little blue, which I rarely see.

We end up on the largest island that is supposed to have supported a small community since time immemorial. Traditionally, the lake dries up in the summer. During that time, archaeologists have found an interesting array of artifacts, indicating that the legends of ancient human life here are not just fiction. However, the Government has formed a new management program and is trying to make it a year-round lake. The villagers object to this because their best fishing season is when the lake dries up, for then they can just pluck the fish out of the mud puddles. I never figured out where the fish for the next year’s crop come from, but this is the tropics. . . creatures just proliferate here.

The principal supporters of keeping Kolleru’s water level high are the fish culture entrepreneurs. Everywhere we go we see huge fish ponds, some as large as fifty acres. Each pond has a pump to drain the lake into the self-contained reservoir. The fish are force fed something that looks like dried dog food, then harvested. Insulated, refrigerated trucks, the nicest trucks I have ever seen in India, make daily

trips to Calcutta's fish market. The majority of ponds are owned and operated by the local villages, with the remaining managed by the Government and private investors from Hyderabad.

In a business project where you get free water—and free land—the entrepreneurs can afford to put money into heavy equipment. We happen upon an operation where a bulldozer is clearing out a huge 200-acre pond on public wildlife sanctuary land—right in broad daylight. Since the water level is only a foot deep in this part of the lake, if that pond is filled, the existing water will be depleted. Anji takes photographs, but everyone seems sure nothing will be done.



Local village children

First chance, I take it upon myself to mention the operation to Mr. Rao at the Irrigation Department. He replies simply that they can do nothing. The Government has given them no authority or funds to prosecute these cases and everyone knows it. The villagers and investors can continue to do as they please.

This fish-culture income is actually transforming the life of the villagers. Many villages now have a village car, a TV, and portable radios. After our boat trip, we walk over to the nearby village to have a cup of tea. Strangely, it looks as if everyone in the village is gathered in front of one particular house.

"Well, this is the first time I've been in a village where there is something that is attracting more attention than the white lady," I mention.

Meerab smiles, "You'd never guess what they are doing. There has been a family feud, so they are dividing up the household goods and family wealth. They have invited all their neighbors to serve as witnesses that everything is divided fairly, so there will be no bickering later."

"Another change in the life of the village; families breaking up," I comment.

"Things are changing too fast for them," Meerab observes.

The next morning just as we are about to leave for a trip to the beach, a botanist arrives from Hyderabad with a type of beetle that kills water hyacinths by boring into their base. As the development office only has one jeep, we take him around the lake to release the beetles where the hyacinths are most prolific. They clog up the waterways so that neither human nor fowl can use the water. The villagers have been cajoled to gather the hyacinth plants as fuel for their gober gas mills, the rural self-contained gas plant that normally runs on cow manure. However, the villagers are not interested in such "dirty work."

After releasing the beetles, it is practically noon before we head southeast, through mile after mile of coconut palm orchards and rice paddy. In every direction we are surrounded by vibrant green. This land is the rewards of irrigation from the Uppatero Canal that runs from Kolleru Lake to the sea. All along the way, we see a network of tributary canals that only have plank foot bridges. Then the road ends because of the main canal, so we have to leave the jeep behind, protected by the driver.

After a hike over sandy, barren terrain, we reach the wonderful Bay of Bengal. The sea is quite refreshing, and the beach is spotless. Of course, it is very isolated with no visible population in any direction. The Indians do not swim; they will take a dip in the sea only for the health benefits of a salt bath. In addition, everyone is sensitive about the dark skin that the sun produces.

When we arrive back to the tiny village where the jeep is parked, Anji heads for the tea stall. I announce that I have to have something cold to drink and head for the cold drink hut. Anji gives me such an icy stare that I know I blew something, somehow. *What now?* I wonder.

"Meerab, I made some serious error. You would not believe the look Anji gave me when I told him I was having a cold drink."

She cannot figure it out either. When Anji comes over after finishing his tea, we find out what the misunderstanding was. I never noticed that the cold drink stand also served liquor. But he noticed, and thought that I was going to have an alcoholic drink, which would be a terrible blot on my character. He was sure that our driver, who does not miss a thing, would report it to everyone at the office.

We had packed a lunch for the trip, but had declined to carry the weight with us on the hike to the beach. On our return, we look for a nice picnic spot, but the coconut palms that line the road leave no space even to pull off the road. Finally, we give up and just stop by the side of the road to eat in the car. Within seconds, a local resident appears to find out if we need assistance. When the driver explains the situation, the man tells us to wait. In a couple of minutes, he comes running back to tell us that arrangements have been made. After all, we are guests—a guest in the home is like a visit from *God* himself. The Indians take this part of their religion seriously. I've never found such hospitality anywhere else on the planet. I benefit from their kindness wherever I go.

We have been invited to eat in the yard of one of the wealthier members of the community. A table and several very rickety chairs are brought out. Our hosts, in their early 70's, are delighted to have us. Next, they fetch the water pitcher and towel for hand washing. However, when water glasses appear, I mentally balk. Most of the wells in Andhra are huge open pits; I think that I should not take the chance of drinking from them. Even Meerab does not drink any of the water.

In general, Andhra Pradesh is a desert. Water is so hard to come by here, that, for the first time in all my sojourns, I actually see men carrying water. They do not carry it like the women in pots on their heads or hips, but have a long flexible pole on which they hang two buckets. They then balance the pole over one shoulder. I also saw my first rat-catcher here. He has traps of bamboo, each attached to a long pole; so he can stick them underneath objects, I suppose.

That night Anji treats us to a local phenomenon—the indoor movie theater. Like many Western things, the Indians converted it into their own unique adaptation. It is open-seating. Everyone comes in, spreads their straw mats, and sits on the floor—no chairs provided. Children are running, babies are crawling, ladies are chatting, and dogs are winding back and forth through it all. I can hardly watch the screen for laughing at the *tamaasha* (melee) surrounding me. Not that the film is worth watching, since

it is the typical, awful Hindi genera with lots of singing and dancing, with little or no plot. Rural Indians love these films. Contrary to the popular stereotype, they have a lot of leisure, except during the planting and harvesting seasons. I have seen the locals waiting for hours in the hot sun to get into the movies every day of the week wherever I travel.

My week in Kaikalur was an exercise in divine patience since no one seemed to know what was happening, or when. Yet everyone else seemed quite content in knowing that they would never know. Certainly, the birds were an unforgettable experience, but my real experience here was the people. When I remember Kaikalur, I will remember Meerab, Anjaneyulu, Mr. Rao, Mama and all the associates at the Irrigation and Lake Development Departments. These kind people with their dedication to making my stay comfortable. . . and meaningful. They openly shared their lives with me, their joys, sorrows, concerns, disappointments. Apart from my overall goal of having a silent mind, I love filling it with new ideas and different points of view. The open and honest Indians continue to make India alive for me.

The next morning, I take off at the crack of dawn to catch the early train for Rajamundry. I arrive at the station right on time to find out the train is two hours late. There is nothing to do but sit and watch the scenery. A lovely sunrise emerges over the horizon. Soon thousands of birds are flying in to feed at the lake, having roosted elsewhere during the night. It is an overwhelming sight as wave after wave of birds fly toward the station. Each shimmers with a glow of backlighting from the sun. I smile as I realize this is the only moment I have had any solitude during the entire visit. Even my encounter with nature has been more intellectual and informative than peaceful and connected. I relax and watch as the birds continue to fly overhead. A beautiful way to start the day—it certainly makes the waiting worthwhile.

Chapter Thirty-six

EXPLORING THE PAST

I finally arrive in Rajamundry, the gateway to the majestic Godavari River. I have been fascinated with this place ever since I saw a movie that was filmed here. The scenes showed the river lined with temples and hermitages—or at least that is what I thought I saw. Subsequently, I created quite an illusion about a taking a trek along the Godavari, spending the nights in villages or ashrams along the way.

From the window of the bus, I spot a decent looking hotel. I jump up and order the driver to let me off. He kindly accommodates me with an unscheduled stop. The next morning I am out at sunup to look for the bathing *ghats*, steps, that I saw in the movie. After a lengthy walk, I do find the main complex on the north end of town.

I am delighted to find that in real life, the scene is much more colorful than in the movie. Besides all the devotees performing their daily ablutions while pouring water and chanting *mantras*, several groups are gathered on the steps performing special rituals, complete with priest, fruit offerings and wafting incense. The lovely scene captivates me. I sit on a step and breathe it in with wonder. Is it because our world has changed so fast that I just luxuriate in these scenes from the past? Nothing changes here; same river, same stone steps, same sounds, same smells. I feel at peace and at home in this timeless world.

Soon my mind takes flight. I begin looking to see if I can find a single item that could not have existed here 2,000 years ago. Everything is made of mud, wood and stone. The priests, decorated with sandalwood paste and ash, wear a simple cotton cloth wrapped around their hips. They chant the same Vedic verses, hold the same butter lamps, and offer the same rice and flowers. I use to do this mental exercise in the Himalayas where I could find an entire village with no sign of any modern contrivance, but this is a decent-sized town.

After enjoying my mental game for a while, I set out to find a place for breakfast. I can hardly believe what I encounter en route. I do not know the millennium, but I discover scenes from the Iron Age right here in Rajamundry. Under the shade of open make-shift huts of sticks, with cardboard and burlap for roofs, I see metal workers making the bowls, shaped like woks, which they use here instead of buckets and wheelbarrows. The craftsmen take a circular piece of flat metal and pound it into shape with a mallet. Regrettably, I have also seen men working in the granite quarries, hammering scrap rock into bits to make gravel. This is India’s history too—but it is not nostalgic. I wander past them, feeling rather dazed. It seems my tripping back in time got a little out of hand.

It’s so late when I find a restaurant that I end up just having lunch. Afterwards, since I am right by the Ramakrishna Mission, I go by to inquire about my proposed trek up the river. I am puzzled to find that, even though it is midday, the gates are locked. As I am standing there trying to figure out my next move, a voice sounds out of nowhere, “May I help you?”

I look up to see one of the tallest Indians I have ever beheld: tall, dark, and handsome with lovely black wavy hair. “Well, I am surprised to see this place locked up in the middle of the day,” I reply.

At that moment, on some impulse, I glance down. On feet as large as a Trojan’s, I observe a pair of many-colored, striped, velveteen slippers with pointed toes. *This is not an ordinary person*, I surmise.

Yes. I think they close at meal times," he informs me.

"I see."

"Where are you staying? I can take you back there," he offers.

"I can find my way easily. There is no need for you to put yourself out."

"It's okay, I have spare time. Have you had lunch?"

"Yes, I just finished lunch. I got up very early this morning to visit the Godavari at sunrise, so I just now got around to eating."

In spite of my protests, he remains determined that he will accompany me to my hotel. After flagging down a bicycle rickshaw, he helps me in. He is so tall that the hood, which serves to protect the passengers from the blazing heat, cannot be raised. So I put the end of the sari over my head and away we go to my hotel.

There he invites me for a beer in the hotel bar. I still haven't got a single clue as to what this guy is about, so curiosity impels me to accept. Of course, I always welcome any opportunity to talk with an Indian since I can always glean some very interesting stories from them. My desire to know more about how Indians think is continually being fulfilled because the they are so clearly open and honest, even at a casual first meeting. This gentleman is to be no exception, neither is his tendency to be a genuine talker. His English is good, but not so good that he does not have to make some effort, not only to speak, but also to understand me. So conversation becomes a bit taxing.

As his story unfolds, I learn that his father was the *raja* in a small kingdom in Rajasthan. Had I been astute, I would have known that he was a Rajasthani royal from the style of his diamond earrings, he informs me. *And what about those shoes?* I reflect.

I mention that I had been in the state of Rajasthan, specifically Jodhpur, and was quite taken with the unique life of the "land of kings." However, he shows no interest in my comment and goes on to elaborate on his story. It was his elder brother who would have inherited the throne; that is, had India not gained its Independence. They have traveled throughout Europe, standard fare for all Rajasthani princes. Both brothers now work in the oil industry. Recently, he was contacted by two different political parties to run as an MP, Member of Parliament, in the Lower House, as representative from his home town.

"I'm a logical choice because our family has the respect of the people there."

"I understand that many of the former princes, particularly from Rajasthan, are now serving in the central government in some capacity. So I suppose it is logical that they asked you. Have you ever had any political aspirations?"

Perhaps he does not understand me because the conversation takes a quick turn about discrimination, particularly against the higher castes. The reservation system is holding back the most talented young people just because they are *Brahmans*, or *Ksatriyas*. Somehow the word Anglo comes up; he comments they are one of the minorities who are benefactors of the discrimination against upper classes.

So I ask for clarification, for I have heard the term used a lot. "Just exactly who are the Anglos?"

"They have some British blood. Some of the British did take native wives during the Empire era. Most of those men stayed here and raised their children. Although they have never been out of India, the Anglos like to consider themselves British. They keep up with the Queen as if she were a close relative. If it rains in London, they take out their umbrellas. You'll see plenty of them in Bangalore," he tells me.

"Well, I did notice some elderly Europeans in Bangalore, but I thought they were retired missionaries

who had made their fortunes here and could not abandon their holdings."

"Oh, no, they are Indians with Indian passports only; they had a British father or grandfather. They were born here and raised here by an Indian mother. They are one of the passing legacies of the Raj. But they all have very good ICS [Indian Civil Service] jobs."

"Why is that? Their knowledge of English?"

"Oh, no. Because they are a minority group, they get special privileges through the reservation system."

"I see."

"I have stepbrothers and one stepsister who are Anglos. My grandfather married a European woman—it was a common practice among the royalty [in Rajasthan] at that time. Of course, a European was never the first wife."

"Of course not. And how many wives did your grandfather have?"

"The Rajput kings had up to four. The European was his third; my grandmother was the first."

"And the children of the first wife are the heirs to the throne?"

"Yes, of course. But don't think the king necessarily favored the first wife. No, it was his duty to create a happy life for all of his wives and children. For example, although she was really quite young, his last wife, my fourth grandmother, was going to commit *sati* at the death of my grandfather. She loved and admired him that much, for *sati* is a sign of respect."

"I understand it is also due to the belief that the man and wife will reunite in their next life together."

"Yes. Of course," he replies with a blank stare that I interpret to indicate that he wonders if he is talking to a pagan, an idiot, or what.

I remain silent, so he continues, "However, at that time, her two sons had jobs in the ICS. That was during the Raj. They told her, 'Look, if you commit *sati,* the British will blame us; we will surely lose our jobs. We beg of you to think of us.'"

"So she followed her sons' wishes. But since then, for over twenty years, she spends her entire day in the prayer room. She actually still performs a ritual prayer service on my behalf of my grandfather every day. You won't believe it, but after she bathes, her hair—she has long hair, down to her knees—stands straight up in the air. Then she goes to the prayer room for her service. Only when the worship service is over does her hair falls down naturally.

"She has not eaten anything or drank anything for the past ten years. And she is not the only one I know. If you come to Rajasthan, I can show you so many things that you will not believe. We have big parties, for we really know how to enjoy life. Lots of wine, roast pig, you name it."

"And will your mother attend these feasts and eat meat and drink wine?" I inquire.

"Yes, if only the family is present, but not if any outsider is there. In that case, she won't. And my Anglo cousins attend our family parties and dinners. We don't show any prejudice toward them at all. They are of our same blood."

He pauses and continues, "But, of course, if there are any guests from outside the family, the Anglos will not attend. Out of respect for them, we always invite them; but they, out of respect for us, will never attend. They know others will reject us for eating with an Anglo."

"Like an out-caste?" queries the present *out-caste.*

“Of course, what caste would they be?”

“Well, that is a fair question. They would not have a caste, so they are out-castes. However, since I just found out that Gandhi was an out-caste, I’m not so sure of the term. It seems that he was not discriminated against by anyone except his own particular caste and family.”

“In general, caste doesn’t make a difference any more. However, we Rajputs are the *Ksatriyas*, the kingly caste, so we only eat among our kind, or, of course, with the *Brahman* priestly caste.”

“But the *Brahmans* in that area maintain a strict vegetarian diet. Do you have a vegetarian kitchen?”

“Yes, definitely. We not only maintain a vegetarian kitchen, but even keep a separate water pot with only boiled water. Neither that pot, nor the water in it, is ever handled by a meat-eating cook. We have to have Brahman cooks for that kitchen.”

So that’s life in a princely family of Rajasthan. What can I say, except to admire his straightforwardness.

By the time I leave the prince with the colorful slippers, it is almost 3:00 p.m. After I shower, I decide that I will have to skip my usual siesta as I have a prior commitment in less than an hour. Instead I go over to the local museum. The collection is very small, but there is one item that intrigues me: a carved wooden statue of a female, standing at least six feet. The wood is very weathered, and has a rectangular hole cut in each shoulder. Therefore, I assume that it was used for carrying in processions. The clerk tells me that it came floating down the Godavari from somewhere up north. My imagination perks up at the thought of heading upstream to an area with such artifacts.

It’s still quite light out when I return to the hotel to get ready to go for an early dinner. To my surprise, I encounter the prince in the hallway, looking for my room. Evidently, the hotel clerk would not give him my room number, so he is virtually knocking on every door. He tells me that he wants to take me to dinner; that’s why he is looking for me. I am hesitant because of the cultural gap. I am ready to eat now and Indians do not eat until 10:00 p.m. He swears that is not problem, for he needs to eat early because he has a train to catch. I explain to him that I need a few minutes to freshen up a bit. So we agree to meet in the restaurant in five minutes—it’s India, five mintutes could mean up to one hour without any disregard for the other intended or implied. The Indian relation to time is definitely one of the hardest barriers for we Westerners to overcome.

One of my first encounters with “Indian time” was at the Sandeepany Institute in 1978. I had to go into Bombay to register my visa at the police station. The easiest way was to take a bus to the train station, then take a commuter train into the city. The manager, Mr. Hanumanthan Rao, a gem of a person, was always available to help any of us fifty students. When he found out I had to go into Bombay, he insisted that he was going, so he would give me a ride.

“Fine, when are you leaving?” I asked.

“Now” was the clear, precise answer. So I innocently stood on the office porch waiting for him. I looked in after about 15 minutes, and got another “Now. I’m coming now.” Several people came by and I was talking to them, so time was passing easily.

When I looked at my watch and saw that over an hour had gone by, I told Mr. Rao, “You’re busy. I’ll go on.”

“No,” he insisted, “I’m coming now.”

After a few minutes, someone came by and wanted a book. I asked Mr. Rao if I would have time to walk over to the near-by women’s hostel right fast to fetch a book. “Oh, yes. Then I will be ready to go.”

I did so, only to turn to wait some more. Finally, three hours, we took off. Had I followed my original plan, I could have already been at the station and on my way back. Forever afterwards, when an Indian

uses the word "now," I always ask, "Is that the Indian *now*, or the American *now*?"

When I enter the restaurant after only ten minutes, dressed as always in my simple homespun sari, the prince has already arranged for a table out on the balcony. Probably in his mid-thirties, he is a charming young man. We both know that we are just two curious travelers getting together for a little conversation, which happens often while touring. First, we order dinner; also tea and crispy snacks to munch on while we are waiting. So for the first five minutes, we are engaged in ordering. Then, in the moment of silence that follows, I look at the prince and realize that he is as drunk as a skunk. As it turns out he has been sitting in the bar drinking beer all afternoon. I do not know why I did not notice before. Our encounter in the hallway was too brief, I suppose.

But alcohol does not affect him, he assures me. When he and his buddies go hunting, they consume up to one hundred bottles each. I have him clarify that he means the one-liter Indian beer bottles. Yes, that's what he means. Soon dinner is served, so I politely and quietly eat my dish of rice and vegetables to the background of some very enchanting music—and some very strange tales.

It seems the prince has an interest in the paranormal, which is not unusual in India. However, some of his information is a bit suspect. After telling me about a girl in India who has ants continually crawling out of one eye, he hits on a subject closer to home.

"But how can you be so sure that President Reagan had a dead alien right in his White House office?" I venture to question his story.

"I have a magazine that shows the picture. An alien is in a closet in the White House. I can show you the photo."

"There may be a photo. However, even if it were a legitimate photo of a legitimate alien, there is no way of ascertaining that the photo was taken in the White House."

He just cannot get my point, and we are sidetracked on the meaning of the word, "legitimate." Our conversation is regularly interspersed with these little English lessons. By now, he has drunk a couple of cups of tea and eaten some snacks, so he is sobering up a bit. However, he is not eating his dinner.

Since I was up at the crack of dawn, I have had a long day in the hot sun. With the slow service, the eating of dinner, the tedium of conversation, I am starting to fade. But not the prince, the waiter even took his meal to warm it for him, and still he has not taken a bite.

"What about your train? I believe you said you had to catch a train tonight."

"Oh, I don't need to worry about that. It's not until 6:00 a.m. in the morning."

It seems to me there has been a little misrepresentation going on. I insist that he go on and eat, as I am totally spent mentally and physically. Finally, when I am about ready to lay my head down on the table in a dead slump, he finishes his dinner. But when he orders another beer, my attempt at gentility reaches its limit. I politely wish him well and excuse myself.

First thing the next morning, I am back on track with my Godavari River projection. I cannot find anyone who knows anything about what I will find up the Godavari. When I finally talk to the head *swami* at the Ramakrishna Mission, he tells me he does not think there are any ashrams. It should have been a clear signal, but I persist. When I analyze it, I find that most of the times I end up in a dubious situation, I have been warned and have totally ignored the counsel.

Chapter Thirty-seven

THE FOREST PRIMEVAL

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Finally, I obtain some advice that if I want to find a more natural area of the Godavari region, I have to go to Papi Kondalu. At least, there I will be able to contact the Forest Department. So away I go on the first bus that heads north, where I meet a most congenial Forest Officer. Satyanarayan informs me that I still have to travel further north to find the natural beauty that I seek. He intrigues me with the news that in Maredumalli, although it is not on the Godavari River, I will find a paradise. What is more, there is a guest house where I can find a room to stay. Good enough for me, away I go on the next bus heading north, for there is only one road north.

Since Maredumalli is quite small, I find the Forest Guest House without any problem. A young man manages the guest facility; his wife will cook meals for me. Immediately, he intrigues me by telling me he can take me to find wild peacocks. Oh, I surely am in paradise. We walk through the village, then through a tract of land where the Forest Department has planted with some spindly evergreen trees. Sure enough, soon we hear peacock cries. I am quivering with excitement as we slowly creep toward the sounds. Finally, I do spot one female. At that same moment, she spots me, so she disappears in a flash. I continue to hear their cries on many of my hikes, but I never see even another flash of one. I am beginning to think that they have peacock “plants” for the tourists. Well, maybe not... there are no tourists here at all.

The next day Satyanarayan arrives to prepare for an important Official of the Forest Department who will be visiting the following day from Hyderabad to inspect the plantations. Here they grow bamboo, a timber pine, and coffee, which has not done very well. Two days later, the Official, whom everyone has been awaiting, finally arrives. At noon, Satyanarayan and his assistant invite me to have lunch with them, a special lunch because of the visiting Officer.

“Wait a minute; something is not computing. There is a special meal because of the Officer? Aren’t you going to eat with him?”

“The lunch is only special for us. The Officer eats well every day because he always carries his own cook and groceries with him in his automobile.”

“But why aren’t you eating with him?”

“Oh, no. We are underlings; he won’t eat with us. He’ll just send his cook over with some food for us.”

“That is really strange. You are not exactly underlings; you run the operations here. It seems to me the director would want to be in contact with the managers.”

“Not over here. Believe me, the British Raj has been only replaced by the Indian Raj. There’s no noticeable difference for any of us—except those on the top rung of government, of course.”

So I eat lunch with these two fine young men on the verandah of the guest house on a tiny rickety table. Meanwhile, Mr. Official eats alone at the long dining table in the main guest house under a whirling fan. But I will have to say the spicy vegetarian dishes are the best I have eaten in a long time, so who am I to complain?

While talking to the officers, I find out there is a small village of the original indigenous tribal people in the nearby forest. The mountainous areas are dotted with these aboriginals, who were never bothered, or exploited, by the civilized society. Living in isolation, they maintain their own cultures and unique languages. However, in the past one hundred years, overcrowding on the traditional farm lands has prompted migration by the town folk to these areas for clearing and cultivation. This impact with civilization is changing their idyllic world.

Inevitably, the next morning, following Satyanarayana's directions, I take off early to find the village. As I approach the village, I encounter what must be several of the poachers the officers were complaining about. (Of course, I will never tell.) About three-quarters way to the village, up ahead on the path, I spot a small band of hunters crossing the trail. When they spot me, they stop and stare, definitely with puzzled looks across their faces. From their scant apparel—bare breasts with loin cloths—and appearanced—dark skin and uncombed hair, I could be right on the Amazon. However, I do notice that they have very streamlined looking steel points on their arrows. I smile and greet them with the traditional palms together and "namaste." This seems to satisfy them because they nod and disappear into the cover of trees.

Finally, I reach the small village, some twenty houses. Interestingly, none of them are made of the natural mud and thatch indigenous to these people. I find out they are government-issue: cement blocks with red-tiled roofs. These cottages will definitely be hotter in the summer and colder in the winter than their traditional mud and thatch huts.

Today the residents are out and about because a government agent is dispensing their monthly ration of free rice from a shed under a sprawling tree. They are quiet curious and friendly, but mostly concerned that I am walking through the forest alone. With minimal English, one man virtually commands me not to return to the forest because of the danger of tigers.

"Tigers? Have you ever seen a tiger?" I question him.

"No," he shakes his head in a way that clearly says, "and I do not want to."

"But if you haven't ever seen one and you live here, it's really doubtful that I'm going to find one."

One thing is definitely noticeable: no garbage dump. There is no garbage dump because there is no garbage. No tin cans, no worn out shoes, no plastic bottles—nothing. The occasional plastic bag brought from town is used and reused until it actually disintegrates. Anyway, they always carry cloth bags on their infrequent shopping trips into town. In contrast, I spot a barren hillside nearby, a result of their slash and burn farming. I am amazed at difference from the Soligas who I encountered in B. R. Hills, who had meticulously preserved the vegetation. I do not understand why vegetation does not come back over these fields when they are abandoned. But it clearly does not, even after decades.

Since I have my general bearings, I strike out down a tiny foot path. Soon I am walking, wandering and watching through a wonderful shady forest. In my trekking about, I have see more song birds in this area than anywhere I have been, even in the Himalayas. I spot several unusual ones that I have never seen before and probqbly will never see again. The best one is the Malabar trogon, a medium-sized rusty colored bird with a long white tail; its red breast is topped with a thin white necklace. Several times I spot a bright red bird, but only in flight. It looks solid red, like a summer tanager, but I never find it in my bird identification book. Frequently, I see several varieties of blue birds, wagtails, bulbuls, kingfishers, doves, woodpeckers and the ever-present jungle myna, the only one that can be taught to imitate some human words and whistles.

As I reach a grove of towering trees, I feel a contentment rolling over me from being in their presence. Yet I keep having an intermittent nagging feeling that I am wasting time. How deep can the "doing something" morality be ingrained? Sitting on a rock watching the stream rippling by or listening to the water splashing over a precipice is not accomplishing anything, but somehow it is so satisfying. Then I spread my scarf on a bed of dried leaves and lie down. A cathedral of bright spring-green leaves reach up

to the sky. I used to do this when I was a child, just lie and watch clouds, unencumbered by a hundred have to's, want to's, should's—just being there, watching, beholding the wonderful creation. No accomplishments seem necessary in this space.

How magnificent is the forest world. I could use hundreds of words and still not begin to describe it. You must go, you must walk, slowly and gently, sit under the wide blue sky, breathe, watch, lie under a giant tree and ask it how long it has been living there. You must listen to the bird song, the rustle of the leaves, the chirping of the insects, and feel the breeze on your face. Observe a tiny gurgling stream—its waters, the sap of the tree, the blood in your veins are the same essence—the liquid form of universal energy. When you feel these things, you can begin to become a conscious being.

However, I have to admit there is one thing I seem to want to accomplish here; that is, to explore any new landscape. That evening the manager tells me there is another, bigger village about five kilometers farther down the same dirt road I followed today. So early the next morning away I go. Again, I hear peacocks, but I do not even bother to try to follow their call; I have learned that lesson. Along the way, I notice some of my favorite palms, the fishtail; however, they look quite unhealthy. When I go over to investigate one, I find a primitive ladder, made from bamboo and homemade twine, slashed to its trunk. Suddenly, I realize I have been walking for almost three hours and have not come upon any village yet, nor a single sign of humans, except this one bamboo ladder. I am hesitant, but decide to go on because the lane must be going somewhere.

Soon, I do reach a small village where I am lucky to find an English speaker: Nageswara Rao, the school teacher. A residential school here provides education for all the tribal children who live scattered throughout the countryside. He tells me that they are quite backward. The worse problem is their addiction to alcohol, engendered since infancy. It seems the natives in this area make toddy from the fishtail palms I was just observing. This toddy is much stronger than the usual palm toddy. Here at the residential school, the children are weaned from the liquor habit, but their parents give it to them when they go home for holidays.

"Why do they give alcohol to their children?"

"To make them more comfortable, and even to warm them on a cold winter's night. They even will give it to the babies to help them go to sleep at night. If the baby is crying, they will give it a rag dipped in the toddy to suck on."

"This is not exactly my picture of the idyllic tribal scene, but I don't think this habit is common among the tribals," I interject.

"You're right, it's very rare. Whereas, in general all the tribal children grow up nutritionally deprived, these cases are more severe. Here we would like to give one glass of milk a day to all the children. However, we only have three goats, so only the youngest children get any. But in their homes, there is never any milk available."

I ask about the tribals' diet in general. He informs me that all they eat is *ragi*, the brown millet, that they cultivate themselves. Of course, I know they also do some hunting because, in addition to the band with spears I encountered on the trail, I have seen a dove-trapping operation and a bag of small fish caught with a spear.

"I realize that *ragi* is very nutritional, but wouldn't it be a good idea for them to have small vegetable gardens to supplement their diet?"

"Oh, no, they aren't interested in eating any vegetables. They would only be interested in growing vegetables to sell at the market."

"So they have bought into the Empire's commercial crop idea. They want to make extra money?"

"Sure, they do."

“What do they want money for? They have their free homes, their free rice. They grow their own *ragi* and brew their own booze.”

“They want to have transistor radios, and even televisions.”

“Televisions?” I honestly had forgotten they even existed.

“Sure, of course, they want to have televisions. Why shouldn’t they have televisions like everyone else in the world?”

I do not mention the reality that they will not be able to understand a word on television since it is all in English. The one government station runs one movie a week in the local vernacular, and most of these people do not even speak their state language of Telegu, but a only tribal dialect. Previously, I had heard about the agriculture programs run on television, which I assumed were for the rural folk. However, when I viewed a couple, I was flabbergasted to find out that all these programs are also in English.

After I leave the village, I find a pleasant spot under a shady tree to sit and think. So many questions, so few answers. How can these people know that they are living in a pristine paradise? I know they have every right to investigate, travel, make their own decisions, and choose how they want to live. Yet how can they possibly keep their wonderful simplicity out in the world? It appears that when materialism meets tradition, materialism surely wins. The Hindus do say the world is in a state of grossifying and darkening—back to the black hole, I suppose.

The village turned out to be ten kilometers distance, but I was lucky to get a ride on the back of a motorcycle for the last stretch back home. When I finally reach Maredumalli, the sun has just set, leaving us with a misty evening. The distant hills have disappeared in the fog, the near-by mountains have faded to gray-blue. I harken to a sonorous voice at the tiny mosque calling the Muslims to prayer. The sky flickers crimson as the crescent moon begins to gleam above the horizon. This time of the day is enchanting for me. In Vermont, I used to watch the crescent moon: crisp clear bright against a dark velvet winter sky. In contrast, here it has a tropical quality with the red and gray backdrop of the sunset, which gradually deepens, bestowing a rose glow to the crescent before it disappears behind the mountain.

Chapter Thirty-eight

THE LONGEST DAY

Although I have been totally engrossed in exploring the forest, I am also concerned about getting over to the Godavari. Hindus commonly use the word *vasana* for an innate desire that one just cannot seem to put aside; a *vasana* simply has to be lived out for better or for worse. And that's my relationship to the Godavari River. I just have to explore it.

I find out that from Maredumalli I can take a bus over to Devipatnam, which is right on the river. When I arrive early the next morning, I find a small town with only one block of small stall-shops where I am able to find one English speaker: Sunil Kumar, the local bank manager. He tells me where to find the only place to stay, a guest house right by the river.

Sunil, playing the role of the headman of the village, invites me for dinner that night. Even though he is in the outback, he keeps himself exceptionally informed about political and economic issues, both national and international. He tells me his job is difficult these days because the new Prime Minister, V. P. Singh, made good on his campaign promise to excuse all old loans to farmers. As a result, many loans were written off. Problem is, now no one is paying their loans; they are waiting to get their loans excused at the next election—which will be soon.

In spite of its reputation as spiritual India, the only topic you will hear on every street corner, in every home, and in every shop is politics. My arrival in India was practically on the eve of the national election in the world's largest democracy. Rajiv Gandhi and his Congress-I party had failed to bring peace to the strife-ridden states of Punjab, Kashmir and Assam. Other issues also contributed to the loss of confidence in the rule of Nehru's grandson. Rajiv's frequent appearances on his own behalf on the one and only TV channel—government-owned and operated—caused embarrassment even to his own party members. Rajiv's foreign flights were another bone of contention. He commandeered Air India planes as if they were his personal property, which meant completely booked international flights had to be canceled.

All the press is negative. The newspapers call India's democracy "the one party *raj*" which means "government has become less and less accountable, more and more whimsical; an authoritarian agglomeration of uninspiring oligarchs." [India Today, Sept. 1989]

No one I knew voted, for they had no time or the inclination to stand in the long lines. A friend's servant was the one exception. She would not miss "the vote" because she received two kilos of rice from the Congress-I party for appearing at the voting booth. Of course, they could not force her to vote for their party, but free rice could translate into votes from these poor people. Over half of India's population falls into this category, so it is worth greasing their palms. It reminds me of a story told of a Punjabi. Punjabis are known for their independent spirit. The man claimed that one party offered him 5 Rps. for his vote and another offered him 10 Rps. "What did you do?" the reporter inquired. "What else? I took them both and voted for whom I pleased." In spite of the *baksheesh,* or bribes, to the poor, Rajiv Gandhi's Congress-I lost.

Sunil agrees with most analysts that the Bofors scandal was the deciding issue, although he remains unsure that Rajiv himself was guilty. Bofors, a Swedish weapons manufacturing company, had paid a large sum of money to obtain a lucrative contract from the Indian Government. Most people think

advisors who were greedy for money had influenced Rajiv. Others think that he is too intelligent to risk his career for money with a family fortune in Swiss bank accounts. So much for making an informed vote in the world's largest democracy. In any case, the majority of voters thought he was guilty and retired his party, thereby retiring Rajiv. India uses the British system of selecting the Prime Minister; election is by the members of the majority party, not by the populace.

Rajiv's downfall, and passion to be re-elected, would insure that politics would continue to be the great debate everywhere I roam. If you listen to the news, you would think that nothing is happening in this vast diverse country except politics. It remains a continual background noise in this up-side-down world.

Sunil also gives me what I take to be a good suggestion in my quest to explore the Godavari. I can take a launch that goes upstream to Badrachalam daily, a journey of some three hours. Sounds great to me! Such a trip will enable me to check out the scene along the river to see if a pilgrimage is feasible. I can just picture it: sight-seeing on the deck of a launch. However, I did not imagine what a launch is India. Although I keep saying it, I still keep forgetting it: This is an ancient land.

I should have turned back when I find I have to walk a six-inch wide plank with a huge, gaping knothole to get over to the "launch." Since the deck is covered with a large cabin, I honestly cannot see what I am getting into until I am already inside it. (I think this has been the history of my life!) So I climb through one of the small windows of the cabin to find six young women sitting on stacks of rice bags. *Oh, dear, rice bag seating—another new experience,* I observe as I accommodate myself. The dark, sinewy women giggle when they see the stranger and shift around to make a space for me. I pause a moment to admire the tiny baby who is suspended from the low ceiling in a hammock made of a nylon sari.

Before I have time to figure out what I am doing here—or realize my mistake—we are motoring down the wide expanse of water. Somehow my curiosity wins out, as I become preoccupied with watching the scenery. Slowly motoring up the wide expanse of brown water, we pass mile after mile of forest standing on high cliffs cut by the river. Occasionally, we pause to pick up cargo or passengers along the way. Each potential port is only an isolated sandy beach without even a single hut. As we approach, in response to the boat's horn, someone on shore signals with a flag whether they need the boat to stop or not. At one stop several young men, carrying some produce in burlap bags, and an elderly man join us.

Indian persons are very conscientious never to touch me, or any of my belongings. I asked a friend why she thought it was that no man ever helped me with my suitcase when I was boarding a bus in rural areas. I thought it was the reverse untouchability; you do not touch a *memsahib* (English woman). She thought it was out of fear that I might think they were trying to steal something. So I am quite surprised when this elderly man suddenly grabs my arm and pulls me like a rag doll toward him. In doing so, he saved me from being leveled by five huge bags of rice that came tumbling down from the back of the boat, right where I had been seated. When I realize what has happened and recover, I turn and thank him with a big smile, but he looks down.

By that time we are hours into the trip, and I have started to fade. I am feeling sort of sea sick from turning my head to the side to watch the passing countryside. I look down at my off-white sari, now streaked with brown dust. The proposed three-hour journey has groaned into a long eight-hour one. As usual I am totally unprepared for such contingencies. Unfortunately, I ate all my rations, a banana and packet of biscuits, long ago for breakfast. I did not even bring any water for what turns out to be a swelteringly hot day. Finally, in a ploy to stay conscious, I sit on the shady side of the launch with my feet dangling in the water. A couple of genteel ladies who have boarded the launch insist in sign language that it is not proper—*who cares, I'm dying.*

I never figure out how these women fit into the picture, for this whole region is extremely primitive and isolated. Later, I examine my Pocket Atlas to verify that, as I suspected, there are no roads to these villages. The river is their only source of supplies and communication. Several villages are perched on the high cliffs, so the villagers have a hard time getting down to the river. Why don't they put in some steps down to the river? I know the answer before I finish the question. The annual flooding of the Godavari would surely destroy their work.

The going becomes slower and slower. As we pass through shallow areas of the river, the two boatmen have to get out long poles to push us until they find a channel deep enough to motor through. Since it is late March, we are in the dry season until the rains start in Bombay on June 10th. They will fill up the source of the Godavari and send water rushing across India to flood this territory. The worst floods can occur when the sun is shining relentlessly here.

In mid-afternoon we land in what must be a larger village. Just as we drop anchor, the launch that left Rajamundry some two hours later than mine arrives. The boat is loaded with a band of *sadhus,* or wandering ascetics. You can hear the word ripple through the crowd: *"sadhus"—"sadhus"—"sadhus."* These are not the ordinary *sadhus* that you find wandering in the Himalayas. These are *trishur sadhus,* named for the three-pronged spear that they carry. They are a Siva sect with an awesome reputation.

Mr. Nambiar, a friend in Madras, had told me about their existence. Sometimes he travels to the real outback areas to set up a factory, in this case, Madya Pradesh. The villagers there were scared to death of these *trishur sadhus.* Mr. Nambiar told me that when one of them arrived in a village, he would throw his begging bowl and water pot down on the main lane. The villagers knew that they had be filled by the time he returned from his bath at the river. Mr. Nambiar had actually seen the scars inflicted by a holy "*trishur*" on one villager who had not complied with a *sadhu's* wishes. The villagers here will have to feed this whole band. For how many days? Little wonder that there is a noticeable reaction among the people.

This stop turns out to be the port for our rice cargo, so arrangements are made for me to transfer over to a hospital boat docked beside us, so I do not have to wait. They are carrying several sick children, accompanied by their mothers, up the river for medical treatment. Of course, that means another trip across a plank, but what do I have to lose at this point?

At long last, we pull up to a shore and are informed that we have to get off, for the river is too shallow to travel all the way to our destiny, Badrachalam. I really never have understood why some scenes strike themselves so indelibly into the mind, but I know I shall never forget that climb as I drag my tired filthy body over red dirt hillocks. When we enter the village, the first thing I spot is the open-air tea stall. My blob of a self falls in heaps over one of the shaky folding chairs and spills down to the red dirt floor. I manage a smile as I console myself, *Just think you've done nothing but sit today*. About an hour and three cups of tea later, I find myself recuperated enough that my body starts rearranging itself into human form. Then I entertain myself by buying candy for the little band of urchins who have gathered to stare. The proprietor of the tea stall had made sure they did not enter the premises to bother me while I was drinking the tea.

At long last the bus for Badrachalam arrives, just a few minutes after a platoon of police shows up—enough to fill the bus. I have to use my last spurt of energy to scramble among the uniforms to get a seat—no "ladies first" public transport here. When I arrive in Badrachalam, just at dark, I am sweaty, exhausted and excessively dirty from the rice bags. In the bus, I am informed by one of the officers that I am blessed. Tomorrow will be the huge annual festival at the temple, one of the most famous Rama temples in India. These police officers are all going there to help with crowd control.

I also obtained from them the name of the best hotel—booked up. The kind manager gives me the name of another to try and allows me to leave my suitcase in the office. He also promises me that I can sleep on the floor in the banquet room if I find nothing else. Perched in a bicycle rickshaw, I go from one hotel to another, each one with the same story: booked up due to the festival.
Finding no room in any inn, I return to the best hotel to find that the manager has recalled that one room has been reserved for a government official, but he will not be arriving until 5:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. If I promise to vacate thirty minutes earlier, I can have the room.

Just as I am finishing washing my grimy sari, blouse and petticoat (it took eight changes of water), I hear a rap at the door. Since I do not know anyone here, I assume it is some drunk looking for someone else. The rap sounds again, with more force this time.

"Madam, open the door, I must talk to you."

I throw on a long dress and look out a crack in the door.

“Madam, this is an Officer. He must talk to you,” the desk clerk instructs me.

I open the door to allow the clerk to enter with a man, who says he is Lakshman Rao, after I insist upon knowing his name. His behavior is extremely strange; he keeps examining the walls.

Although my small suitcase is in plain sight, he does not pay any attention to it.

I ask him what he wants several times in a tone that is not particularly friendly. The hotel clerk is rolling his eyes to signal me to be cautious. However, I am in no mood to be condescending. This Lakshman Rao is not in uniform, nor was he able to produce an I.D. card when I requested it.

Finally, he asks me, “Who is with you?”

“No one is with me. I came alone.”

“But why were you looking for another hotel?”

“Simply because they told me there was no room here, as the clerk here can plainly verify. You don’t have to bother me for that information.”

“But what were you doing this afternoon in a small village?”

Now I realize that the police officers must have reported the presence of a white woman on their bus. “That’s where the boat landed that I was on. Don’t you know that the launches cannot make it to Badrachalam because of the shallow water?”

His English is so poor that the clerk has to translate what I am saying. My patience is really running real short. It is late, and I am not looking forward to a 4:00 a.m. arising.

“Madam, you have to register your camera with the police.”

“In the first place, I don’t have a camera with me. In the second place, it is after 10:00 p.m. and I am not going to tolerate another minute of this abject stupidity (bet the clerk didn't translate that phrase). If you need to talk to me, I will come to the police station in the morning. . . at 9 o’clock.”

With that I practically push the two men out the door. The clerk is visibly shaking in his sandals at my behavior. One’s nervous system can only deal with so much in one day, I excuse myself. Within seconds, I flop on the bed in sheer exhaustion after having completed the longest day of my life. An audible groan creeps out of my mouth as I crash into the safety of a deep dark black hole of unconsciousness.

I am out of the hotel by 5:00 a.m. My only thought is to get out of here, but I have to wait until the police station opens so that I can comply with my promise to meet Laksman Rao this morning. After a cup of tea, I head out to find the famous Rama temple. Even at this early hour, hordes of festive pilgrims crowd the temple grounds. A large field by the temple has been roped off into sections with narrow rows. Tonight the whole space will be filled with pilgrims for the main celebration and vigil. I have always thought it unfortunate that the foreigners who invaded Bharata had superior weaponry. With their native ability to go without sleep and survive on a bowl of white rice or a few dry *chapatis*, I am sure the Barathis would have triumphed in any war of attrition.

The temple is not open yet, but a kind gentleman arranged for me to join a family who is paying for a private ceremony. They do not want me to leave without Lord Rama’s blessing. Of course, the family is the “extended” one; everyone from grandparents to grandchildren is present. They warmly accept me into their flock with smiles and *namastes*. I gratefully accept their kindness: God knows I need some kind of blessing.

In spite of my best efforts, even questioning several military officers present for crowd control, I cannot find the police station. I finally find a government office where I can report that I am leaving town. In spite of my frustrated mood, the dignified gentleman, Sri Balaiah, insists on greeting me as the honored guest. I am not even one sentence into elaborating my trauma when he interrupts me to inquire as to how I am enjoying his country. Totally disarmed, I let out a deep sigh, and relax. I explain to him that I love his country and was enjoying it immensely right up until the time I met a Godavari launch and Lakshman Rao.

After some fifteen minutes of small talk, I finally am able to give him the details of my situation. I explain that I must leave because the festival has made it impossible for me to find a hotel room. Mr. Balaiah assures me that he will handle the matter with Lakshman Rao, so I can leave town any time I want. As I leave the building, I note a placard: "C.I.D" Division. The C.I.D. is equivalent to our C.I.A. Oh dear, I do feel a moment of compassion for Lakshman Rao. After all, no one wants the C.I.D. after them.

For obvious reasons, an Indian bus suddenly looks like a royal coach. It'll be a long time before I commit to a trip on a "launch" again. *Not in this lifetime*, I reassure myself. I find the overland terrain quite pleasant as we wind through hills and forests. We even pass several wonderful ponds filled with lotus and water lily. Come to think of it, I have seen more ponds with lotuses in this general area than anywhere else I've traveled.

A week later I read in a local newspaper that one of those launches sank—it was overloaded— drowning 00 people. It had left from Rajamundry packed, so there is an official who is being held responsible there. A launch only holds 25 to 30 people maximum, the report states.

So now that I know the river reality, my *vasana* to trek up the Godavari is finished, exhausted, crashed, done in. There's nothing equal to firsthand knowledge. I just had to find out for myself.

Chapter Thirty-nine

TIME FLOATS

After the Godavari trip—let's say, with the bubble of that illusion burst—I decide to give up challenges and find a nice quiet place to stay. The Swamini had suggested I try *Shanti Ashram*, which she personally had visited and found very peaceful. Further, she recommended it because it was nearer the sea; therefore, the temperature would not soar as high as other areas of Andhra Pradesh.

I am relieved when I arrive at the bus junction nearest the *ashram* just after 4:00 in the afternoon, so I will have plenty of time to catch a local bus to arrive at Shanti *Ashram* before dark. When I inquire, I am informed the bus will be coming soon. No one seems to know how soon, an ominous indicator at best. I sit and wait, then I circle the cement platform, then I sit and wait, then I circle. . . again. . . and again. While I memorize every crack in the cement, hours creep by. Suddenly, I realize it is getting dark, so I will have to find a new game. Anyway, by now, the platform is so packed with waiting passengers that I have no space to maneuver.

Every thirty minutes, I question the ticket agent, who is sitting out on a folding chair under the only light, a naked bulb dangling from a thin wire. But all he has to offer is "it will come soon." "Soon" will be surely added to my words of caution in dealing with the Indian world.

Just after dark, an Indian Christian preacher who speaks English approaches me. Of course, he is interested in saving my soul. "Look, sir. I do not need to be saved from my sins. I need to be saved from spending the night on this bus platform. Can you help me?"

Then I explain that I have been here for over four hours being told "it will come soon." Obviously, I am having some big doubts. I have not even been able to eat for fear the moment I leave the premises that the bus I have been awaiting will appear.

The preacher immediately switches gears and throws himself body, mind and soul into helping me. First, he explains that the bus that goes to the *ashram* is actually owned by that *ashram*. He expresses this fact with disdain, insinuating that they are at fault for having poor bus service. Further, he opines that a spiritual organization should not be doing such a business anyway. I could care less who owns the bus; I just want a bus. So sidestepping that issue, I question him to find out whether there is a hotel in this small town. I am calculating that I can spend the night and deal with a bus in the morning.

"No, madam, no lodges here," comes the foreboding answer.

After several inquiries with other waiting passengers, he predicts the *ashram*-owned bus will come by 9:00 p.m. He is right. Exactly on the hour, the bus pulls up and every single soul on the crowded platform heads for it. Try to imagine the mob that has accumulated after five hours of waiting. Of course, they never complained like I did—they knew the bus would come "soon."

Practically before I have time to move a muscle, the bus is inundated filled saturated overloaded. Tenaciously, the Christian preacher runs out and tries to get a seat for me Indian-style: bribe the driver. But to no avail, he says there simply is no room. He is correct; I see people sitting on the windowsills. As the bus pulls away, someone jumps onto the rear bumper: "hanging room only."

When that plan crashed, the gentleman remembers that there is a government guest house just down the

road. We traipse through the dark streets only to find out that there is no room available. The caretaker is already bedded down on his pallet, but he yells through the dark hollow of a window that several officers are expected early in the morning. *I bet some officers arrive every morning,* I speculate. So back we go to the station to wait for the 11:00 bus. My Samaritan is sure there will be a bus then. Only after I persuade him I will be okay, does he take off when his bus arrives.

Upon boarding the 11:00 bus, I make it clear that I want Shanti Ashram. The bus is only half full, so I can even sit down. As the bus pulls off into the black of night, from the dark aisle issues the sound of a friendly voice. One of the passengers heard me ask for Shanti Ashram. Since he is also visiting there, he kindly volunteers to take over as my guide. *Rama, Rama, your blessing has finally arrived—better late than never,* I heave a sigh of relief.

After an hour's journey, we enter the entrance arches to Shanti Ashram—Abode of Peace. My aide knows just which door to knock on to find the clerk who can assign me a room. The young man smiles a big welcome as if this late arrival is a normal occurrence. (With the bus service, maybe it is.)

He greets me with a friendly note, "Coming to *ashram* any trouble?"

"Oh, no, no trouble at all." If I am ever going to learn that it's best to leave some stones unturned, some stories untold, to keep my mouth shut, surely it will be here in India. Anyway, who has the time, I'm ready to crash.

Thankfully, I follow him down a dark path to a building where he shows me to a room for the night. After making sure that I have everything I need, he tells me that he will see me at the prayer service, which begins at nine o'clock in the morning. *Nine o'clock service instead of the usual 5:00 a.m.—now this is a place I may be able to survive in,* I muse hopefully

Since the sun brightens my room early, I have time to stroll about the premises before prayers. As I meander around, I am beholding another miracle in the desert: fifty acres of mango and cashew groves. Swami Omkar planned and established the *ashram* in the 1930's. At that time, he had visited the U.S. and was able to get some financial donors for the project. Unfortunately, during that trip, he slipped on some icy steps in Chicago and broke a hip, thus sustaining an injury that he suffered from for the remainder of his life. Returning to India to stay, he dedicated his life to establishing this haven of peace as a retreat for spiritual seekers.

Everyone calls this area a jungle, but it does not fit my idea of one. When I think "jungle," I conjure big-leafed trees, vines and exotic flowers. Here the countryside is covered with masses of huge thorny shrubs—at least 12' high and 12' wide—with only tiny sparse foliage, typical of desert plants. Yet, I am to discover that it is filled with its own variety of creatures.

As I stroll through tall trees and flower gardens, I cannot help wondering how the tall thorn bushes were cleared out one by one with the few primitive hand-tools available here. The Swami was determined, and was even inclined, to do some physical labor himself, specially the pruning of the orchards. This project was essential, for the crops would sustain the *ashram* financially. Alas, he died ten years ago and now this place is practically empty, except for a few retired people.

After my tour through the orchards and gardens, I see that this place looks quite promising. My body needs a substantial rest. I am really feeling a bit beside myself that I have not had any time to even think about serious reflection, study or meditation since I left Swamini's Chinmayaranyam. How mischievous time can be—that was only a couple of weeks ago, but it seems like years.

As I enter the prayer hall, I am surprised to see a European woman plopped on a large cushy pillow right up front. Shusheela (her adopted Indian name) is dressed in navy and white pants of broad stripes and a chartreuse blouse in an extra large size, as she is of ample proportions. Evidently, she takes care to maintain the mounds of baby fat, as she has a packet of cookies at her side. To begin the service, she leads a prayer and reads several selections from one of Swami Omkar's books.

I soon find out the reason for Shusheela's status. She feels—and several Indians have confirmed it—that she is the reincarnation of Shusheela Devi. The first Shusheela was one of several American women who were a financial force behind the Swami's *ashram* project. In addition, she spent twelve years in the 1930's and 40's in this *ashram*. To have an American disciple at that time, particularly in the outback of Andhra Pradesh, was quite rare. Everyone loved Shusheela Devi. Several residents here still recall what an angel she was. Judging by the stories of her service as a nurse to the near-by villagers, plus doctoring of the animals in the *ashram*, it is easy to believe that she deserved their adoration. She died unexpectedly in a car accident in the U.S. some thirty years ago. It is into those footsteps that the new Shusheela, thirty years of age, has effortlessly stepped as a new incarnation.

After the service , I meet the head of the *ashram*. A sweet gentle woman, Mataji Jnaneswari, was not designated to be the director. She is a quiet, contemplative type, while her sister was the extrovert/ director type. So they made a good team after the Swami died. Unfortunately, her sister died a few years later, so Mataji inherited the leadership role. She knows the operation well, as she and her sister came to live here to serve the Swami when they were still teenagers. Although it may not have been her preference, I find it pleasant to have someone so calm and composed in charge.

After breakfast together, Mataji arranges a room for me in a nice two-room cottage, surrounded by huge majestic trees. A long covered porch stretches across the front, screened with heavy wire in a one-inch grid. In the rear, a kitchen with the same heavy wire screening spans the back. Throughout the areas of hot climate, the area for cooking is commonly located in an open-air setting. However, I will not have to use the kitchen, for food from the communal kitchen is delivered to me in stainless steel canisters at mealtimes. Therefore, I am set for a retreat.

Somehow, from some plant I touched while wandering about in Maredumalli, I contacted a poison-oak-type rash. When I was traveling yesterday, patches of itching were coming on fast. Today the inside of my left arm has started to ooze. I have not had poison oak in years—but when I get it, I get it badly. Lacking the correct homeopathic remedy, I decide the only thing to do is to fast for several days. The Mataji agrees it's a good idea. Best of all, she tells me coconut water is available here. The word for this tropical ambrosia is the first word I learn in every language.

Daily the gardener brings two fresh green coconuts, cut from the *ashram* trees, right to my door. This *kobari nilu* is all I need for nutrition. Even hepatitis patients can imbibe this water, which would eventually transform into coconut meat. It is not the water found inside of a ripe coconut—the Indians throw that out. Neither is it coconut milk, which is made from grated coconut steeped in water to extract its flavor and vitamins.

I spend the next four days very quietly. Fasting is a major tenet of a health system favored here called Nature Cure. The theory is the body knows how to cure itself given the opportunity. Instead of expending energy in activities, including in eating and digesting, the body and organs rest; thus enabling them to heal and rehabilitate.

On the first day of the fast, I seem to have endless daydreams, definitely unusual for me. Normally, I can just override any unwanted wool-gathering with positive thoughts, but today I see I must just let the thoughts dissipate themselves. This phenomenon is not unusual when fasting, but I find it irritating. *Relax, they are simply mental impurities coming out, like the physical ones,* I reassure myself. Once the spiritual teacher, Swami Chinmayananda, told me I should not be so particular about what birds fly across my clear blue mind-sky. "What difference does it make?" he challenged me. *But why do I get buzzards?* I have to lament.

After a few days, the mental effects of the fasting seem to be less. However, the itching and stinging, particularly of one arm have not improved a lot. During the night, I lie awake for hours on end, hoping for sleep. Time floats between hours that drag by and long scenarios played out in dreams of five-minute naps. The hands on the clock that normally announce the scenes in my life—breakfast time, study time, dinner time, bed time—have no meaning as I wander in and out of my mental world. I learn to cuddle

into my mental world to avoid clock time. The sleepless nights pile up on my consciousness and loosen my grasp on who I am and what I am doing here.

One afternoon, I am lying awake in a sort of stupor from lack of sleep, when, again, I hear a strange noise. I noticed it yesterday, but ignored it. This time I get up, open the door, and creep into the adjoining room. There I detect that the noise—rasping and gnawing—is coming from a built-in cabinet. When I tiptoe over to it, through the glass-paneled door, I see the source: a big rat. Fortunately, it does not see me, as it continues to make a meal of the wooden shelf. I quickly retreat to my room and bolt the door between the two rooms. *Oh, my God, I am living with a rat.*
I figure it must go outside at night since there is nothing but wood for food in that second room. So a couple of hours after dark, I stealthily enter the room and turn on the light. I do not see or hear any sign of the rat. Then I close and bolt all the wooden shutters, so that it cannot reenter the room. I assume it was a successful venture, as I do not hear the gnawing the next day.

Every night, I have to get up a dozen times to pour cool water over my itchy rash to try to get some relief. Then, quite by accident, in a fit of exasperation, I discover hot water, as hot as I can bare it, stops the itching for long periods of time. It's contrary to normal theory; perhaps the heat carries off the poisons that are on my skin. What a wonderful relief. I sink into hours of a deep silent slumber.

With my physical irritation improved, so is the quality of my mind. Each morning, I sit out on the verandah for hours listening to dozens of birds, all happily singing and chirping and calling. I love to connect with the birds through their sounds, especially when I first wake up in the morning. In a relaxed state, it seems as if I can hear their tones through my body before the sound actually reaches my ears. Even though the temp is definitely warm, a lovely breeze wanders across the shady verandah now and again. After this quiet observation of the birds, I find it easy to let my mind drift off into a peaceful meditative state. The peace is so genuine and encompassing, I wonder why I do not do this daily everywhere.

Time floats over me. Sometimes I am hardly aware of the difference in now and yesterday, for scenes cover my mind like the waves rolling on top of each other over a sandy beach. Though I am thankful for this quiet respite to meditate and reflect, I decide to take the opportunity of the solitude to evaluate: What am I doing here? "Here" meaning in the literal sense. What am I doing in India?

I go back to the beginning: How did I happen to come to India in the first place? Okay, I originally came to India for the innocent reason to help out with a charitable project. Almost immediately I had the socks knocked off my mind. That mystical experience has definitely impelled my continued interest in India and what could be called a "spiritual quest," although mine is so individual it certainly does not fall into the classical definition. Surprisingly, considering the impact of that experience, the quest has remained in the background of my life. I found that omission justifiable in U.S. since I was working and surviving. *Isn't the same thing happening here?* I question myself.

I begin to recall that only a month after I arrived in India to meet with Swami Chinmayananda the first time, we went to Bangalore where he was to lecture and inaugurate a new temple. It was March and springtime in Bangalore is delectable. Mammoth trees line the streets, draping bouquets of pink, purple, and white, while others emit the most delicate fragrances. This was my first encounter with the lush nature of the tropics. I was enchanted. I was delighted. I floated. This bountiful natural setting enhanced my spirits, while the philosophical and spiritual discourses by the Swami expanded my intellect. Even the setting of the discourses was mind-boggling and exciting—sitting under the stars in a huge cricket field large enough to accommodate the thousands who came to hear him.

The temple inauguration was to be on the seventh day of the ten-day program. An inauguration is an elaborate ceremony to actually enliven the idol by connecting it into the thought-form energy established through centuries of worship and ritual of that particular deity. Swamiji was to bring in the power, whereas the priests were responsible for clearing the space of any foreign energy and inviting the specific deity to participate. The priests had been preparing the ritual fire pit and chanting *mantras* for days in preparation for the event. Along with the chanting voices, smoke from the offerings of incense, clarified

butter, rice and saffron were wafting through the air. From a pit beside a large flower-strewn stage, another group of priests was beating drums. Needless to say, it was a very dynamic atmosphere.

I was dressed in a two-piece sari from Kerala. Since it was the first time I had worn the native dress, I was relieved that my initial experiment was in this easy-to-wrap version. Just as I arrived at the temple, the Swami was coming down the steps. He exhibited visible delight at seeing me in a sari, but expressed concern for my comfort. I assured him that I was okay because I had secured the whole swaddling mess with a giant safety pin.

Boooong. . . . boooong. . . . boooong. . . . As I sat down I was aware that the drums were making so much noise that talking—not even thinking—was possible. I closed my eyes, then I closed my senses as the ladies from the nearby village crowded in on top of me and my friend, Usha, who was sitting beside me. Then I closed my mind to everything and just let myself drift into my gratefulness for being in such an awesome place.

After a half-hour or so, the Swami climbed up on the stage and announced that before the inauguration, we would have a group meditation. As a matter of fact, he explained, this evening was a most auspicious time for meditation because, by chance, an eclipse of the full moon was about to occur. Since the moon is the deity of the mind, when nature throws a shadow over the moon, it is helpful in veiling the chattering mind. We were to take advantage of this moment to attempt to experience the divine substratum on which the mind plays, just as a movie film plays on a blank unblemished silver screen.

The Swami insisted that we all have a *mala* (counting beads) in our hands for the meditation. Frankly, I had never used a *mala* because I thought it was too elementary. However, this evening I followed the rules and held a *mala* in my right hand. To begin the meditation, he instructed that we were going to chant a *mantra* (sacred verse) together. As he began to vocalize the short incantation, I was concentrating to be able to pick up the Sanskrit words. Immediately, I noticed that my hand became huge, so big that the bead of the mala *between* my fingers seemed like a tiny grain of sand. *This will never do*, I thought, and just dropped the *mala*.

At that moment, Idropped myself—I disappeared. I cannot say where “I” was or for how long. The first instant I experienced consciousness, I was aware that the Swami was speaking, but far away. So I knew the meditation must be finished. I think it was only at that moment that I realized that I was spread throughout space with no form at all. One cannot describe the experience. Even now I cannot figure out where my thinking came from. Neither were there any colors or forms, for there were no eyes or mind to perceive with. However, I was aware of individual thoughts. I can only say there was awareness and thought—nothing else. They did not come from my brain because I had not found it yet. Then I became conscious that there was a tiny little hard body sitting down on earth, something like a big toe. Surprisingly, I was not alarmed. On the contrary, I apparently knew exactly what to do. Somehow I was able to find the ring finger on the left hand of that physical body. After gently willing that finger to move, with a lot of effort, it began slowing tapping on the knee beneath it. Thump. . . thump. . . thump. . . I began to slowly. . . slowly. . . slowly. . . to descend, to pulsate downward until I fit back into the physical body.

At that point, I assumed that I was just me again. But when I opened my eyes and looked around me the whole world was so different. Everything had the same appearance, but they were so intrinsically beautiful. Every person present, including the Swami, still seated on the stage, was a cell in my body, alive and dynamic. In awe and adoration, I took a deep breath and looked up at the moon, which still showed a reddish hue from the eclipse. I perceived that the moon was a red *bindi* (the red dot that Indian women wear) on my forehead. I could have reached up and just peeled it off like a paper moon. I had one thought, *I'm not sure I wanted to know this.*

By that time, everyone had gotten up and was stirring about. With a lot of physical difficulty, I collected myself and stood up. Although pretending to be a physical being was awkward and painful, my mental/emotional self continued to experience incredible bliss.

It may sound like an egotistical experience, but I can tell you it was most humbling experience one can imagine. To see the panorama of life from that perspective makes our daily concerns seem so transparent and petty. When one is immersed in love peace bliss, temptation and its companion sin do not exist. What could one possibly desire when one is so perfectly complete?
I remained in that blissful state for three days. I could not eat and could not sleep, and really did not want to talk. Actually, anything I tried to eat gave me immediate diarrhea. Then I got on a train for Bombay. By some miracle, I had a whole compartment to myself, so I was not disturbed. I slept the entire 24-hour journey. When I woke up, I was my normal ole' self again. I do not even know if the physical body and brain have the energy to sustain such a state indefinitely.

Naturally, I thought, *this is great stuff. No wonder people are coming to India*. Ominously enough, when I mentioned the experience to a couple of friends in Bombay, they told me, "No, Nancy, nothing like that has ever happened to us and we have been in India for two years." So with passing time, I gradually put the experience aside and got on with my life. Essentially, I led a normal life, but with a kind of existential depression. I had to question myself: Where is that wonderful divine me? What am I doing struggling like an ant? Can't I at least be a grasshopper?

When I returned to India this trip, I admit that I would have liked to have had a repeat performance. However, it was difficult to find anyone who knew enough to even discuss the experience with me. Obviously, I was extremely selective whom I asked. Tublu, a Bengali *Brahman,* told me that it was a "real" spiritual experience. So did Siva RamaKrishna, the *Brahman* in Kumbakonam, but he also warned me that these experiences come once in a lifetime. So if I am not going to have a life reeking with bliss, what is next best? I guess that is the dilemma that I still have not worked out.

When I conjured up the experience, it was almost as if I relived it. As I deal with people in the *ashram*, the past memory undulates over me like winging shimmering hovering skimming clouds, which I can never catch. I try to weave the different realities of me together, but they always seem like loose strands waving in the breeze, unknown to each other. I am this, or I am That. *Where is the bridge?* I lament.

Since the summer heat is descending upon us, Mataji is leaving for her usual migration to the mountains during the hot season. And the "hot season" is in full-burn mode. It is already seriously sweltering at ten o'clock when Mataji and Shusheela climb into the *ashram* van for the trip to the train station. The old swami who I have seen at the prayer meetings when I was able to attend joins the group who bid the Mataji farewell. After the van has disappeared in a cloud of red dust, I go over to greet him with a "*namaste.*"

Swami Ramananda Tirtha replies in a spirited voice, "You have not seen where I live. Come and see the cave where Omkarji used to meditate."

"I would love to," I reply.

Although it is high-noon heat, I follow the nimble, thin being down a long, partially shaded path to the northwest corner of the *ashram*. Finally, we come upon several simple huts, but too few trees. I enter a one-room cottage behind the Swami.

"I'll make you some tea," the Swami pulls up a chair for me.

"Oh, Swamiji, please don't. It is much too hot to drink tea."

"No, no, it's okay. Tea makes you sweat, so you will be cooler."

I have heard this theory again and again, but it does not work for me. It just makes me hotter and stickier.

"Just take a little. It's *prasad* [blessed food]," he urges.

"Thank you, Swamiji," out of respect, I capitulate to my sweaty fate.

The Swami insists that I return each day to have a cup of tea prasad with him. I do so regularly, but somehow do not find time to make it a daily exercise.

One morning when I am at the Swami's cottage, a troop of thirty to forty pilgrims—men, women and children—come tramping through. They all bow and touch my feet first, then the Swami's.
The first time this touching-feet thing happened to me was years ago. When I was visiting a friend in Bombay, her servant got down on her knees to touch my feet. I was very disconcerted (to put it mildly), and told her "no, no" while tucking my feet behind the chair legs. I looked over to my friend for some help. If I read the look on her face correctly, it was my behavior that surprised her, not the servant's.

So this time, I force myself to sit quietly. I close my eyes and imagine that they are bowing to the marvelous, boundless, loving, Divinity within me, not to me. With that state of mind, I open my eyes and smile at each one after they touch my feet. However, less than half dare to look me in the face, mostly the women, and a few children, but not one man. It is respectful to keep one's eyes lowered. After they finish the foot salutations, they file down to the meditation cave below and then quickly disappear out the door. Strangely, I keep feeling the all-pervasive feeling of love and peace that I consciously called upon. I can hardly get out of my chair and veritably float down the path under the scorching rays of sunshine.

As soon as I was back to normal after fasting, I found a great library with lots of interesting old books. One day when walking over there, I am elated to see a couple of familiar faces. Shruti and Sheela, two *brahmacharinis* (feminine form of *brahmachari*) from Chinmayaranyam, have come for a four-day visit. They had been giving some spiritual lectures in a nearby town and have come here to rest between engagements. Their presence is timely, for they are able to take over the daily programs in the chapel. All the retired residents show up to hear them—the only time they have done so. I enjoy being part of the audience and seeing these beautiful young women. Judging from their attentive audience, they must be quite polished in their presentations.

And they have good news for the nature lover; they know of a spring-fed waterfall nearby. I can hardly believe it—in this dry territory. Early one morning we set out to find the oasis. As we are leaving, Shruti asks me, "Have you had your bath?"

I know it is one of those cultural things, but I never have gotten past feeling disconcerted when I am asked if I have bathed—as if anyone could survive without several baths a day in this blazing heat. "Which one?" I respond with a chuckle.

On the way, they point out some trees with hard nuts that are boiled to make soap. I remember reading some comments by a Peace Corp worker reporting that the Indians did not have soap, insinuating, of course, that they did not bathe before the Peace Corp arrived. Nothing could be farther from the truth. They have a myriad of plants, nuts and berries that they used for soap; certain ones were to be used on the hair, certain ones for laundry, and others for bathing. In many areas, they use *besam* (garbanzo bean flour) for bathing because they consider soap bad for the skin.

The trip to the waterfall turns out to be quite a hike. I could have never found the site by myself. About mid-way, we pass through a village composed of little cottages of mud, with a neat and cared-for appearance. I cannot help but wondering how far it lies from the nearest road.
After we pass through village, we walk along a dike running through some fields. We notice several men bending over weeding and chopping with those short-handled shovels. When they spot the *brahmacharinis* in their saffron coth, they burst out singing.

The young women interpret for me: "Please pass on. We are poor people who have no food to give a *sadhu*. So please don't spend the night here." The villagers have songs for everything they do, planting, harvesting, thrashing, grinding, but this is the first time I have heard a song like this one. It reminds me of the *sadhus* I saw when I was on the Godavari launch. The tune was meant, and taken, in good humor. We laugh, wave, and move on.

A waterfall really does exist in this desert! We actually encounter an eight-foot-wide expanse of cool, clean water, gushing out of some stone caves in the side of a hillock. After wading and splashing around, we walk to the top of the falls. En route, we pass a large granite bull *(Nandi)* that tells us that at one time this spot had status as a holy place. Water flowing out of rocks in the desert! I guess it is sacred.

No water is visible on the hillock at the top of the falls, but we are totally surrounded with tall trees, which must be sustained by underground springs. Over to the side, we spot a towering anthill that is at least fifteen feet high, so ancient that much of it is covered with dry moss.

“This ant hill is very auspicious,” comments Sheela.

“In India, everything is auspicious,” I retort with a grin.

They have a good laugh at my remark, then turn to start back down the trail. I pause a moment, rather captivated by the spot, taking in the tall trees, the dappled sunlight on the granite rocks, the whisper of a breeze, the water singing over the granite slopes. Oh, yes, it is all so auspicious: the gray stone, the red soil, the swaying twigs, the sun, the shade, the ant hill, the green moss—and me. Everything, everywhere, is truly auspicious.

With my strength back and the rash under control, daily I am spending more time exploring the premises. The peace that Swami Omkar emanated still pervades the entire *ashram*. He spent most of his time in meditation, even a year at a time in total silence. The very trees and plants and flowers and foliage seem to have absorbed the peace. Every flower appears to have a smile on its face. When one slows down and listens, one becomes aware that the peace is a reflection of something inside of oneself. He called himself the “apostle of peace” with one essential message: *Only peace in each and every individual will bring peace in the world.*

On Easter Sunday, while I am meandering through the formal garden area, I cannot resist plucking one stem that holds two lovely lilies. I usually leave the flowers for everyone to enjoy, but today I indulge myself with loving thanks. Back in my room, as I sit and admire them, I wonder at the creator who could have conceived of this amazing beauty. The cool green of the center fades so delicately into a lovely soft coral with such precision, not even the greatest artist could hope to imitate it.

The natural world is surely a connection to a spontaneous and lovely aspect of me. The peace I feel is not dead and dull, but bright and alive. I begin thinking this peace I feel is from connecting to this beautiful bountiful nature.

Chapter Forty

GARDEN OF TREES BIRDS STARS

With Mataji and Sheela gone, I am totally alone. It has started to dawn on me what a great place I have found for a serious retreat. Although the spiritual progenitor is no longer here, the staff is quite clear that the reason for the ashram is to provide an environment for spiritual retreats. I am not obligated to do anything, nor expected to socialize with or entertain anyone.

In addition, the office staff is very generous in getting any supplies I need, including mung beans, so I can sprout them for my only green vegetable. The secretary even took library books to copy pages to save me the one hour trip to town. Then they would not take any money for the service, not even for the copying charges. Of course, I will give them a donation when I leave, but they do not know. They really seem to be on purpose with their service.

It's a ten-minute walk over a sun-scorched path to get to the office and post office. When I need anything or have any questions for Raju, the manager, I always go over early in the morning before the sun is at full blaze. However, I then linger for a while to enjoy the trees. This area must have been the first stage of the ashram, for the trees are awesome. One mango tree, which shades the retirees' quarters, is as big as a mature oak. I cannot imagine how many bushels of mangoes will be picked from that one tree.

I am most delighted when I spot my favorite tree, the Shiva Lingam. Its subtly fragrant flowers of waxy white grow on short branches coming straight out of the trunk, so I can easily reach one of the perfumed treasures to carry with me. They wilt after one day, so I do not mind taking one. The tiny round lingam, symbol of Shiva, is protected by a cap of fringe, which represent the serpents that protect him. Interestingly, this tree that seems so intrinsically Indian is not a native plant. The British brought it here from Africa during their many horticultural exchanges.

One morning when I am passing by, a charming Indian woman, dressed in the traditional white of a widow approaches me to invite me for tea. Since her English is good, I accept. I am happy to meet one of about fifteen elders who have chosen to spend the *vanaprastha* stage of their lives here in this ashram. And I only need to meet one, the rest will thereby find out all about me. I am sure they are all Telugu speakers. I love the sound of Telugu, said to be India's most poetic language. It's full of *lu*'s and *du*'s for word endings. For example, the word "okay" is *paravaalidu;* in Tamil, it's simply *paravai*. I love to say "*paravaalidu,"* even though it seems a slow way to say "okay."

As soon as I sit down in her sparsely furnished room to watch her start up the kerosene stove, she asks me a very common question in Andhra, "May I know your good name?"

"Yes, I'll be glad to tell you my 'good name,' if you will explain to me why the people here are always asking for my good name. What is the world is a good name? Do people have bad names?"

She laughs and then explains, "Maybe it does not translate well from Telugu, for our language is very flowery. It's like saying you are such a jolly and clever person that you must have a special name to go with those characteristics."

"So my good name is just Nancy. I'm glad to know that I don't have to have a bad name too."

I am always questioning these idiosyncrasies. Recently, I asked a gentleman in my train compartment

about the use of "thank you." He was telling me about having worked in Germany, when he happened to mention that the Germans had the irritating habit of saying "thank you" a hundred times a day. He had felt that it was such nuisance that he had told them, "I'm only going to say 'thank you' once in the morning, and that's it for the day."

So I took the opportunity to remark that I had noticed that the Indians always seem to be offended when I say, "thank you."

"Of course, they are offended. Just like you would never say 'thank you' to a family member, since they are a part of you. So when you say 'thank you' that is insinuating that you do not consider them a sister or a brother."

"Oh, I see."

Unfortunately during fasting, I got into the habit of sleeping late—until 7:00 a.m. How easily good habits leave us. I ran out of tea bags long ago, so I do not have it to help push me out of my morning doldrums. Dull or not, I sit, to practice the breathing exercises that were recommended by a sage last year. Then I chant the *Gayatri Mantra* aloud, as these practices seem to brighten my mind. Watching the breath is to harmonize with the breath that breathes you. Chanting the *mantra* is to align with your higher self. Afterwards, I force myself to do some plain physical exercises—for the body.

Having so much solitude, I begin to slip into a quiet joy as I go through each day. I experience the pleasure of being with Nature and with my quiet self. Gradually, I spend more time just sitting in silence and letting the peace of the place settle into my bones. I guess you could call it meditation. As always, I am reading a book or two, material to reflect upon to continue to expand my knowledge and understanding of this extraordinary miracle of Life that is creating itself every day. The Hindus say that there was no beginning to the creation because each day is a new creation. I am beginning to appreciate that concept.

Each morning I awaken with a smile on my face. If it is not there, it soon appears when I realize where I am. One morning the cries of a koel bird awaken me early. I smile in my sleepy stupor, as I reflect, so the rains must be coming. This large black bird is known as the harbinger of the monsoon. I love to awaken to its wild cries in the still dark morning. Since I am completing forty-nine years of a sojourn on Planet Earth today, I consider his call an auspicious start of the day. At the suggestion of Swami Omkar (via his books), I am fasting on liquids and maintaining silence today.

Since it is hot as ever, I spend the day inside with my journal and books. However, the moment dusk starts to fall, I grab my straw mat and head for the roof to watch the moon rise. As I lie in anticipation, I behold the clouds shift and transform while the moon flickers and reflects through them on its journey overhead.

In this radiating heat, night has become my favorite time. Plain and unimaginative as houses are in India, they have one great feature that makes all the rest forgivable: the flat roof. Every evening I go up the staircase, roll out my straw mat, and lie down to look up at the stars. Such extraordinary beauty and unfathomable mystery. Those shining jewels in a black velvet sky are suns—incomprehensible. Life is such an incredible mystery. Just think of it, billions of years ago we were just stardust. If we somehow have the intelligence to build a human body out of stardust, surely we can manage to create a peaceful planet with a warm, cozy spot suitable for everyone.

Because of the heat, I decide to start sleeping on the roof. I experience some anxiety about the critter situation, but remind myself there is no food to attract an animal up there, not even wood. During the night, whenever I awaken for a moment, I greet my sister stars with great pleasure. Once in the Himalayas, I had awakened in the middle of the night and found myself falling from a star. It was an awesome experience that I never could explain, so I suppose I never really tried. In some obscure book, I found the information that both Pythagoras and Plato thought we earthlings come from a certain star and would return to that same star—after having experienced three perfected lifetimes. Maybe I just took a quick visit back to my home star.

One night, I awaken suddenly out of a deep sleep at about midnight. I look up and smile as I see a shooting star go streaking by. I always feel a spark of joy when I see a star streaking through the heavens. No, it must be a satellite, I tell myself, as suddenly it starts moving slowly and steadily. Did I just imagine that it was racing across the sky just a moment ago? Then the star actually stops directly over me. *I'm not going to be able to figure this one out either,* I tell myself. What an inconceivable creation we inhabit. If we could really experience it, truly absorb its wonder, its vastness, its beauty, I think we would be unwilling to sit in offices all day ever again. It is like we are in a paradise, but we seem content to conceal ourselves in a box. But are we really content?

I take regular trips to the Swami's cottage, not only for the tea, which I found peps me up considerably, but also, in this scorching heat, I need an excuse to move myself outdoors for some exercise. En route as I pass the well, I am made aware that we are running out of water. Yes, I have been drinking water from one of those big open wells that I had been avoiding. Actually, they are aesthetically lovely. Every time I pass I like to look down in it and see the kingfisher that sits on a branch growing out of the side. The three wells on the property are lined with gray granite stones with long, flat stones stuck into the side in a spiral to make steps. However, the two water boys simply use a rope and bucket.

Usually, they deliver two buckets of water to everyone every morning and evening. Now I am getting only one bucket each delivery, so I am not able to take an extra bath in the hottest part of the day. So I wet a towel, wrap it around my shoulders and sit on the verandah listening to the muted chirping of the birds and watching the leaves nodding in the subdued afternoon breeze. Although I spend ninety percent of my time alone, I have opportunities for socializing with the variety of guests that come to an ashram. Naturally, some of them are wandering *sadhus* who bring stories of holy places or sages. Others are householders who are taking a short retreat from the world. So even though I am sitting quietly in a peaceful garden, I get all sorts of stories from the outside world brought to my consciousness—and journal.

A rather intriguing-looking *swami* arrives early one morning. Tall and thin, with long white hair pulled back in a bun at the nape of his neck, he looks just like a Greek philosopher. However, the yellow stripes of sandalwood smeared across his forehead divulge his true origins. He has another uncommon feature for a *sadhu:* large, round diamond earrings adorn his ears. I mean large, at least one-fourth inch in diameter. In addition, long ropes of silver beads, one with alternate coral beads hang from his neck. During the morning prayer service, he sings a solo *bhajan,* devotional song, which translates something like this:

> No matter how many millions you may have;
> What is the use, if you have no peace of mind?
> You may have hundreds of relatives to care for you;
> What is the use, if you have no peace of mind?
> You may know all of the scriptures forward and backwards,
> But what is the use, if you have no peace of mind?

Later, I am delighted to encounter him in the *Swami's* cottage when I go there for a cup of tea. The moment I arrive, Swami Ramananda immediately starts boiling the water. After a proper greeting, it is not a spiritual question I pose for the visiting swami, but a very mundane one—in my most subtle style, I blurt out: "Sir, are the diamonds in your earrings real?"

"Yes, they are real," Swami Ramananda translates his reply.

Then the visitor goes on to explain that his parents saved them in a box since he was a small boy. Since the diamond earrings were a gift from his parents, he feels that he should not renounce them, but should wear them. His whole demeanor tells some story, but I am too inexperienced to discern it. Too bad Shruti and Sheela have already left; they could have filled in the blanks for me.

The traditional—and modern for that matter—society of India allows for an unimaginable diversity of individual expression. We may think we Americans are pro-individualism, but individuality is seldom rewarded unless it is set on the tracks of the mainstream society. I promise you, there is no

disdain—even by the higher castes—toward anyone who is outrageously different in thought, word and deed here, including dress—or lack of it.

Another guest is a retired widower who appears to be in his early sixties. His perfect English allows us to have in depth discussions. He tells me he hopes to spend his time living in an ashram, so the visit here for a couple of weeks here is a test.

I gather bits and pieces of his story. After his retirement, he had taken another "assignment," but that did not work out. He does not call it a job, since *Ksatriyas* (at least in Andhra Pradesh) do not take money for work. The assignment was teaching at a residential school run by a friend in exchange for a living quarters, servants, food, car and driver. However, the position did not work out because his friend was not running the school as efficiently and effectively as Mr. Raju thought he should. He opted not to be a part of a sham operation that was collecting exorbitant fees from unsuspecting parents.

"But you were married and had a family. How did you support them without earning any money?" I query him.

"Oh, I was forced to work for money then. I had a career in a bank. But now that my children are all doing well on their own and my wife is gone, I have no responsibilities. So I am free to live a traditional life of the *vanaprastha;* you know, living in the forest, studying and contemplating.

"So you won't consider remarrying?"

"Oh, no. My children would never allow that."

One day our conversation wound around to the subject of the Indian government taking over Hindu temples. He mentions that a friend has the cushy job of being the government official overseeing the famous Tirupati Temple. Few foreigners get the opportunity to visit this famous temple. From waiting in lines for up to twelve hours, the shaving of the head before you enter (not required, but endows a preferred blessing), to the gold jewelry that the Deity commands for favors bestowed, to the gooey sweet *prasad* served up after the *darshan*—this temple is preeminently Indian. Stories abound of how much gold is given to the Deity. Temple worship is a system of thought power, reinforced and maintained by chanting and offerings by the priests. You give to the Deity; the Deity gives back to you. I have been led to believe that Tirupati is the richest temple in India.

Of course, I just have to inquire of Mr. Raju as to the amount of the compensation his friend receives for this cushy job.

"Oh, he won't take a salary. They just give him a bag of money."

So that confirms what I was wondering; no salary means his friend must be a *Ksatriya* also. I question him further, "A bag of money. Just how much do you suppose that bag contains?"

"Oh, at least 20,000 Rps. This is a donation to keep him quiet because they don't want anyone to know how much money actually goes through those temple coffers."

"Twenty thousand just skimmed off the top to keep him quiet? And this is monthly?"

"Yes, monthly. He just looks the other way."

"You are telling me that this is an example of the *Ksatriya* code of honor, to just take money and look the other way. Why do I get the feeling something is missing here?"

"Oh, he is very honorable. He will not even let his wife go out in the car the Government furnishes him. He has bought a separate car for her."

I have always said that I want to experience a different mind-set—just for the experience of seeing the world from a different perspective. But damn, I want it to make sense! Contradictions and

inconsistencies continue to abound flourish and thrive here.

The heat has reached the pinnacle of endurance because a hurricane is brewing in the Bay of Bengal, so we are now getting high humidity along with the heat. Just after dark, predictably the power goes out, so we do not even have any relief from the overhead fans. Concerned for the Swami, isolated in his hut, I take a lantern and a pot of water to walk out to check on him. There is no well in the area he lives in, plus I know he gives out the water that is delivered to him daily to the laborers that work on the grounds here, so he could be in need of water. When I arrive, he is already in bed, but calls out that he is fine and has plenty of water. My cotton sari is completely soaked with sweat as I start out to return to my cottage.

What a night. At first, I could not sleep for the heat, then the thunder and lightning begin. The monsoons are definitely what I term “Todo, we aren’t in Kansas anymore,” storms. I do not fall asleep until practically dawn. I awaken very late, so the verandah is scintillating with hot sunny steamy sticky air. Seeking shade, I go out back of my cottage to sit on the cement bench under the huge tree where I usually see an owl. In spite of the long willowy branches, the sun still manages to beam sparkles of light through the lacy leaves. However, I am in luck for when I first sit down, I spot a small owl directly above me, but it shifts its position to hide itself.

After finishing my morning exercises, I look around to enjoy the chirping birds and flitting butterflies. Then I spot the owl, hiding overhead, which is smaller than the one I usually startle when I pass this way. Now sitting in plain sight, the little guy is clearly watching me. When he sees me looking up at him, he bends down and cranes his neck as if to take a closer look, exposing a white beard, probably a neck-ring. Then he settles back to stare at the stranger, occasionally blinking one eye, then looking to one side, then the other, then back at me. I attempt communication by chanting whoooo—whoooo—whooooo to it.

Some people criticize Hindu philosophy as being too intellectual. But I feel that it gives understanding into our oneness with all of the world and its creatures. Vedanta explains with rigorous logic that everything comes from and is an expression of *Brahman*, the omnipotent Godhead. As I am opening myself with wonder and love to the little owl and he is opening with wonder and love to the strange, featherless creature wrapped in a white sari, it is a marvelous exchange of god enjoying god. After some time, when I have to leave for lunch, I give my little companion a proper “*namaste*” as I depart.

After only two monsoon rains, springtime is presenting its colors: white lilies, orange amaryllis, yellow butterflies and red velveteen bugs. The Mayflies are tumbling out of the ground, rushing to relish their one day of life. By evening the whole sky is filled with flickering soaring golden wings. What a sight to see the multitude of gossamer wings celebrating life as they fly up to the heavens.

New green lacy leaves cover the trees surrounding my cottage. The tropical trees never dare loose all their leaves at one time. The old leaves wait for the arrival of the new ones; then hesitate a moment before dropping, so they can shade the tender new shoots.

All the orchards are spilling over with their abundant fruit offerings. One day while I am strolling around, I begin smelling the most wonderful fragrance, like ripe tropical fruit and jasmine intermingled. I finally spot the source, a tree with a yellow fruit. I am puzzled because these are supposed to be cashew trees. Then I spot the small curled nut dangling below the fragrant, yellow fruit. Later that day someone tells me the yellow fruit is edible and gives me one to try. It is all water and fiber, which does taste okay, but leaves my lips with an unpleasant pucker. I decide to stick to smelling them.

At last I discover an authentic jungle critter. One morning on my way to the Swami’s cottage, I spot a huge lizard. Well, it’s like a lizard, but at least three feet long. When it sees me, it raises up on its two front legs. I am at least twenty feet away, so I do not feel any danger. However, neither am I absolutely sure I am seeing what I think I am seeing. I ask the Swami if such a creature exists. Although he says, “yes,” I am still not convinced as sometimes he does not understand me. So I keep the question in my mind: *Was that fellow real?*

Ask a question; get an answer. I suppose because of the rat, I am always careful to close the wire door to

the front verandah. Today when I brought in a bag of fruit, I forgot to go back and secure it. Several hours later, I walk out to find I have a guest: one of those three-foot lizards. When he sees me, he is truly terrified. He tries to leave, but cannot find the exit. I grab a broom to try to gently coax him in the direction of the door that still remains ajar. He is just too panicked and takes a flying leap for the wire fencing. With a lot of wiggling and tail flopping, he somehow manages to squeeze himself through the hole of the wire mesh. The existence of three-foot lizards has been confirmed.

And nature does come in different forms. One night I wake up suddenly. While I am still wondering what caused my awakening, all of a sudden, sharp teeth start to clamp down on my big toe. Fortunately, since I am at least half-awake, I am able to jump out of bed like a bat out of hell. The rat is back. *Oh my God... it has found my room, and my big toe!*

Aruna and the girls who help in Mataji's cottage have a kitten, so I ask to borrow it for a night. But only for one night—Aruna was bitten on the finger by a rat last week, so the kitten is desperately needed for their rat patrol. Sure enough, no sooner does the kitten enter my room, it starts sniffing out a trail to the bathroom door. There is a small hole in the corner due to dry rot. *Can a rat squeeze through such a tiny hole?* I ponder. Must be, for when I stuff the hole with stones, I find that the ones on the backside of the door have been moved around. Fortunately, it is plugged up enough on my side that the hole remains blocked. It's gratifying to know that I can outsmart a rat.

A few days later, I actually see the rat again, in broad daylight. I find it sitting up on the rafter that runs across the rear of the kitchen. Surprisingly, it does not run away, but sits there staring down at me. After all, we have been roommates for a month now.

I look up at him and speak aloud, "Look, I know you won't believe this, for it does not seem possible that a big person like me can be so frightened by a little creature like you. But the truth is, I am frightened to death of you. Here's what I am going to do: I will leave you some food here every night. In exchange, I expect you to stay out of my room and away from my path."

After that encounter, each evening I place a piece of *chapati* on the ledge, right below where I saw him. Every morning, there is not a crumb left. We have made our peace; I never see him again.

Coming down the path by my cottage one afternoon, I notice a couple of little yellow and black sapsuckers gathering around the bath water drain. I immediately go to work rigging up a small birdbath with clean water. Then I sit by the window to watch as the male dances and flits, spreads his wings, bobs up and down, dances and prances up and down, back and forth. Finally, he flies over the bowl, hovers, and then drops down to the water. He hesitates, then starts to repeat the ritual. I am so grateful that I have time to care for my bird friends. They are so alive and spontaneous.

While watching the birds dance around the water offering, I happen to notice a banana in a jackfruit tree. *A bright yellow banana in the jackfruit tree—am I imagining things?* In spite of the heat, I immediately go out to investigate and encounter the most wonderful creature. Definitely, a member of the reptile family; the lizard is a sixteen-inch yellow specimen. As I approach it, the black slit of its yellow eye turns toward me. I hesitate, partly because I do not want to frighten it away, but mostly because I do not know if it can jump. Yet, I am close enough to see that it has no claws. Instead, it has a padded finger and thumb like a two-pronged paw. As I watch it, it clamps these pads around the branches to maneuver itself from branch to branch, while curling its tail around the branch for balance. Without claws, I do not think it will be able to travel on ground, so it must stay in the trees. Little wonder that it chose this lovely place to live. But how did it get to this isolated garden? Did it use to live in the thorn shrub jungle that existed here fifty years ago?

Of course, I am thinking his paws are some special adaptation of evolution, so I cannot wait to get to civilization to check it out. Later, in a Hyderabad library, I find a guide to Indian reptiles. My little banana friend is shown in it, but with claws, not pads. So I am eager to contact the Indian Natural History Society when I reach Bombay. I do attempt to phone them several times, but never can reach them. This is not the only time the telephone system in Bombay has inconvenienced me considerably.

That evening I lie out on the roof for a while, but later go to my room to sleep as there is a monsoon storm headed this way. Although my bag is packed and ready, I cancel my idea of leaving tomorrow to wait until the storm passes. I sleep soundly and awaken at the crack of dawn with the most wonderful, fresh breeze blowing over my body. I feel so incredibly cool and comfortable. I tell myself, *don't move, you have absolutely nothing to do today*. Although I do not think I fell asleep again, I am able to lie there for hours immersed in the gentlest peace. Surprisingly, when I get up and start moving around, the peace remains. I watch cautiously. What will be the item that carries my mind away. What desire, what expectation, what drama will I find to disturb my peace? I carefully watch my actions and thoughts; I want to stay with this one as long as possible.

The next morning, I get up at 4:00 a.m., so I can catch the early bus to my next destination. I smile as I walk beneath the big letters that spell out "Shanti Ashram" across the archway of the gate. I feel truly grateful for the peace I have experienced here.

Chapter Forty-one

KINGDOM BY THE SEA

Vishakapatnam sits right beside the Bay of Bengal. I find it an impressive place—clean, quiet, cool—good possibility for a sabbatical. Actually, it could pass for a European city on the Mediterranean. However, I catch the sight of a nude *sadhu,* adorned only with a dab of gray ash smeared on his penis, strolling down the main street. Thereby, I am informed that, indeed, I am in India. Here's a poignant example of the individualism I had mentioned previously.

I even find an air-conditioned restaurant where I have a great lunch. The little bowls of assorted vegetables and *dals,* plus yogurt and dessert arranged on a round stainless steel *thali* (tray) taste like ambrosia. I don't particularly miss good food when I don't have it, but I really love it when I do—especially since the opportunities have been fo few lately.

My next stop, Bimili Beach, is only a one-hour bus ride the following morning. When I reach the large tree that serves as a bus stand, I ask for directions to the Souris Ashram. A quarrel promptly ensues between a rickshaw driver and a coolie as to who will take me there. Fortunately, the vendor in the near-by banana stall interjects his advice. He opines, since it is only two blocks, the coolie is the logical choice. I follow the slim dark man with a rag wrapped around his head to cushion his load down a narrow lane. Then we turn onto a broad street that runs along the beach where he stops in front of an utterly wonderful sprawling house that faces the sea. Is this an *ashram*? There is no sign, not even the usual placard with the house name. When the coolie pushes open the gate, I find myself in a little whitewashed paradise, surrounded by a tropical garden. This is not your usual *ashram*, but an airy and spacious house, built around an open inner court.

I arrive at about eleven o'clock to find Mataji Souris already eating lunch. My first impression is that she is a sweet woman of about fifty-five years of age. Her tiny size and dainty manner give her a certain childlike quality. Her thick salt and pepper hair is pulled back in the traditional braid.

"Hello, I am Nancy." I greet her as I put my offering of bananas and mangoes on the table.

"Yes, I know; I recognize you. I got your card, so I was expecting you," she replies in a calm, yet chirppy voice. *Thank goodness, she speaks English well,* I note. She is dressed in an immaculate white starched cotton sari. White glass bangles cover her arms half way up to her elbows. These bracelets appear to be her only adornment.

"I think you will want to go to the bathroom," she breaks the awkwardness of my just standing there gawking while she is in the middle of eating.

"Yes, that is a good idea." By now, I know how to freshen myself quickly by just pouring a few cups of water over my head, arms and legs. Although plenty of Indian women will not eat a bite of food after traveling until they have had a full bath from head to toe and put on clean clothes. I have not taken on that injunction.

When I return, Souris immediately takes on the role as hostess. She informs me, "You will have to wait a few minutes as the girls want to make you a vegetable."

No matter whether you are a guest in a palace or a mud hut, your "food" will always be a primary

concern. “Thank you, but tell them I am totally adjusted to Indian food, so I don’t need anything special.”

“You even eat chilies?”

“Yes, I can, although I prefer a mild dose.”

“Here we use very little chili powder. They put in a bit for flavoring.”

“Good, that’s fine for me.”

After lunch, I join Souris as she sits out on the verandah answering her correspondence. In spite of the approach of high noon, the long shady verandah across the front of the house is breezy and cool. I sit taking in the environment with a quiet observing mind. A couple of house sparrows twitter and hop about the bushes. Many people disregard the sparrows, but I enjoy the little fellows with their white collar and black bib. After all, they are the first to come to a feeder or to build a nest in a human’s yard. I never saw a sparrow at Shanti *ashram*; it must not be civilized enough for them there. Here in Bimili, we have the regular crow instead of the jungle crow, and lots of them. I watch one bringing sticks to a small tree beside the veranda. She is building a nest just when the worse heat is setting in. Five days later, she is still busy with the task, but the jumble of sticks continues to grow.

After a short time, I begin to feel sleepy. The gentleman sitting beside me has already nodded off. I get up to stretch my legs by walking up and down the veranda. Before I know it, I have wandered down the steps to check out the garden. Ah, I see a small pond with white lotus flowers holding their delicate treasures above the water. Souris must be truly a lady after my own heart. I feel enchanted as I walk through the narrow paths of the garden, lined with deep pink oleanders that sway against the blue sky.

Soon Souris retires for her nap. After washing clothes and piddling about, I go for a walk on the beach since fluffy clouds have bestowed us with a shady afternoon. When I return, I check my laundry only to find out that crows have dirty feet. Several crows had landed on the line my clothes were hanging over (no clothespins) while I was out. The two ladies who tend to the cooking and cleaning were watching me as I hung my clothes where the crows like to sit, but no one said a word. One cannot tell another, specially a guest, that they are doing something wrong—or stupid, as the case may be. After I rewash the clothes, one of the women shows me a place to hang them under the veranda, so they will be out of crow territory.

Every morning Souris is up by 6:00 a.m. to watch a video of an Indian dance or music on her 24" color TV. I find that it is an enchanting way to start the day. After tea is served, Souris goes to chop the vegetables for the salad, so I go up on the roof to do my daily exercises to keep my body in shape. When Souris goes back to the prayer room to arrange the flowers from her garden, I sit with her and watch, as this is my only time alone with her.

I enjoy watching someone do something consciously and clear-mindedly. Then it is also good practice for me to watch someone doing something I think I do well, without interfering, giving advice, or butting in. Daily she makes several fresh arrangements to decorate the dining table and prayer room.

After a couple of days, I begin to use the opportunity of this time alone with Souris to talk to her. While she is arranging the flowers, I explain to her that in the U.S. I was always too busy and too involved with projects to make money to survive to meditate regularly. My plan was to save money and come to India with the purpose of serious *sadhana* (spiritual practices). At the same time, I wanted to do some purposeful activity. Although I had the idea of being involved in some service project, the editing of a spiritual magazine published in Bombay has been somewhat of a substitute.

“The activity part has worked out okay, for I have enjoyed the editing, Otherwise, things have not worked out as I planned. So I guess you could say that I have given up on the idea of getting enlightened.”

“In the end, everyone must give up the desire for enlightenment,” she tells me, sweetly and wisely.”

“Yes, that may be true, but I gave it up in the middle.”

She laughs at my observance, but makes no comment. Well, I am not one to fool myself. I know where I am at. I have lots of ups and downs.

I have noticed several photos of the great Indian sage of this century, Ramana Maharshi, framed and hanging on the walls of the prayer room. His name, which is a bestowed title that means “great sage,” is reserved for the great *rshis* of yore who wrote the Vedas. The fact that he has been given this appellation means that even the most orthodox consider his wisdom and attainment equal to those *rshis*.

So one day, I ask Souris, “Did you actually know Ramana Maharshi?”

“I did not know him, no. No one really knew him,” she replies.

“I understand what you mean, but did you ever meet him?”

“Oh, yes. But I never spoke to him, nor he to me. I just went there and lost myself.”

I remain silent. After a moment, she continues, “Then really there was nothing to say, nothing to ask.” She pauses again. “No, nothing at all. One or two times I did have a glimmering of a question I was considering asking him. But every time another person would ask the very question I was thinking about. So any questions I had about *sadhana* were answered that way.”

“And your father went with you?”

“Oh, yes. He went, although he was a radical. Of course, my father was no saint; but he was a *sadhak* [truth seeker]. He lived in total freedom as he saw it.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if even enlightenment is in one’s destiny,” I reflect.

“You see we are already enlightened, but to know it! Actually, it’s such an easy thing, yet so difficult. Just as when we see a flower it looks so simple, but what it went through to sprout up through the hard dirt and develop and grow, such a struggle to bring itself to the beauty of its full flowering.”

“So many teachers say that after enlightenment, it’s all joy. But from my limited observations, it simply can’t be true.”

“Even joy is a quality of the mind. If you go beyond the mind, what is the meaning of joy?” she counters my comment.

“Many teachers say if you are practicing faithfully, surrender the ego, or selfish desires, then all good will come. I think it is all just a golden carrot for us donkeys,” I continue.

“But surrender, real surrender, is not easy. If you have truly surrendered, again, you are beyond the mind. Then what is the meaning of good and bad? But even so, you have to act as if there is good and bad, otherwise you will get hurt and you will hurt others. That’s why traditionally the true spiritual knowledge was only given out to disciples who had passed rigorous tests of discipline.”

“But I still wonder if enlightenment is part of one’s destiny. Can one really accomplish anything by self-effort?”

“No, you are wrong there. Self-effort is beyond destiny. Only the mind and body are bound by *karma* [results of action]. Ramana Maharshi says that self-effort develops will. Self-effort and will are both independent of *karma* [action],” she instructs.

“I guess I lack self-confidence. This whole phenomenon is so contrary to the Western mindset. Even though we may think we have understood, it’s not the kind of understanding that comes from living saturated in the belief that you are a divine being, as in the culture here.”

“One must have tremendous faith,” Souris interjects.

“Oh, I really do have faith in the system; faith that others have made it to the goal. But no real confidence that I can. I think that doubt somehow keeps me from making a total commitment.”

Souris used the word “*karma,*” which has variations of meaning that makes it difficult for the Western mind to comprehend. The word *karma* is the noun form of the verb root for “to do.”

Therefore, its simplest, and most common, meaning is “action” or “work” or “performing a ritual.” Again, *karma* is referred to as cause and effect, or the inevitable result of the actions. To act is the nature of mankind—no one can exist without action. However, we can choose the attitude from which we act. A result is built day by day with the actions we take. If we lay our bricks haphazardly, a wall cannot be straight. If we lay them consciously, the wall will be stable.

It is simply ludicrous to think that the Indians are passive because of their theory of *karma*. The Indians are not passive because of any religious theory; they are too practical for that. They are passive because they have been invaded for the last 2,000 years by armies that had more powerful weapons than they did. They found out a cannon does not distinguish between a good guy and a bad guy.

While living in Souris’ paradise, we do have an occasional interlude with the outside world. People are always sending her video tapes they consider to be interesting or informative. One afternoon we watch an ordinary Swedish film with English subtitles. The story is basically about the disintegration of the life of a European family with the extra touch that the daughter falls in love with her mother’s lover. I do not think Souris would have understood half of it if I had not been there to interpret between the lines for her. The world it portrays seems like an alien planet in this peaceful little kingdom by the sea.

On Sunday I am elated to find out that they watch the regular Indian classical movie. The movies are in the various vernaculars, but with English subtitles. Of the non-commercial genera, the plot is always a sensitive and straightforward portrayal of an aspect of Indian life, usually with some social comment or criticism. The directors are the true artists of the cinema here, but Sunday TV seems to be the only place to view their creations. Since I have not been around a TV in a long time, I am honestly looking forward to the treat. But my pleasure is cut short, only thirty minutes into the movie, the electricity goes out. No problem, Souris has a Honda generator. Just as they start it up, the phone rings. The local hospital is calling. They were in the middle of an emergency surgery when the power went out, so they need to borrow Souris’ generator. Well, that’s that. It is rural Andhra Pradesh, the power will be off for hours.

I take off for a walk on the beach. As I look out over the sea, memories of past beaches flutter like beautiful butterflies through my mind—oh, it is a splendid sea. Heading north, I discover an old dilapidated mansion, which puzzles me. There is a wall around it and a lock on the gate, so I pass on. Then I find an old British cemetery, also locked with a chain and padlock. I continually find remnants of the European presence even in remote spots.

As I turn around to leave, I notice an old woman inside who is sweeping and cleaning, so the gate is slightly ajar. When I squeeze through the small opening, the woman looks up and sees me. She starts to say something, but then turns and returns to her work. Maybe she realized we would not be able to understand each other. I love to read old tombstones; they tell so many stories. Most of these graves are those of small children—and young wives; one large headstone contains a list of sixty men who were lost at sea. Undoubtedly, they were young men coming over to seek their fortunes.

When I return to the *ashram,* I ask Souris about the deserted mansion. I should have known; it was a summer home of one of the former Andhra rajas. After Independence, he did not have the funds to keep it up, so it is just rotting away. She also informs me that during World War II, this Raja allowed American soldiers to bivouac in it while guarding the Indian Ocean from Japanese attack. As for the European population who now rest in the cemetery, they were plantation owners in this area, which was once a major producer of jute, made from hemp. Hemp (marijuana) has many commercial uses, other than getting high. If you see an antique book without yellowed pages, they were surely made from hemp.

The current reformation against the planting of hemp has eliminated our best source of paper and unnecessarily caused the destruction of too many trees.

Back in the old days, the British used to plant controlled substances such as marijuana and opium without compunction. In China, they even fought three wars against the Chinese Emperor's edict to prohibit the importing of opium--*The Opium Wars*. An American author, who was attached to the Embassy in Calcutta, told me, "The Brits did use these substances, a few quite heavily, but it was not common in most areas. The habit was not socially sanctioned, yet the users were not ostracized by their social group."

After several days when I am alone with Mataji, I take another opportunity to speak of spiritual matters. "When did you become a serious spiritual seeker?" I question her.

"You see, I always was. Even as a child I was always trying to figure things out. The world seemed quite grotesque to me, yet so fantastic. It was like a Disneyland to me. They thought I was mad; that is, everyon except my father. I would walk into walls and even beat my head against the wall. I never wanted to do the things other children did.

"Then when I was ten, I experienced a major change. I had been naughty, some childish thing, I suppose. But to punish me, they locked me in my room. I was screaming and crying and crying. Suddenly, I noticed a spider on the wall. I became totally absorbed in watching that spider weaving its web. I became so interested that somehow my mind and body disappeared. Then, when I became aware of myself again, I started crying again. 'Now that was strange,' I told myself: 'In that absorbed state, I was not crying.' In that state, there was no sorrow or suffering; yet, no joy either. Of course, I became fascinated to know what that state was.

"I was always trying to figure these things out, but I kept it to myself. By the time I was fifteen, I had understood that it was not just the body that was the obstacle; it was also the mind. You see when I was a child, I was trying to break out of the physical body when I was hitting my head against a wall. Now I realized you still have a mind. So I went on thinking about these things. I could not even go to school because I had terrible migraine headaches all the time," she pauses because the cook has brought a couple of vases and a bunch of flowers from the garden.

She arranges them neatly on the table, then continues, "Then an administrator from one of the schools met me. My father was the deputy school inspector, so she must have come to our home to speak to him in that capacity. When she saw me, she asked my father about me. Then she told him that I was destined to be a saintly person and have an *ashram*, so he was not to be bothered about my schooling. Further, she told him that I was not to get married, so not to pressure me in that regard either. That woman was like a guardian angel who appeared right in my home. Her words helped me a lot to be able to establish my independence," she smiles as she leans back to view her floral creation.

"Since my father was a writer, we had a very literary household. Often a variety of authors and even classical musicians would visit him. In those days he was an ardent agnostic and a cynic. He even wrote against the gods, and wrote so many criticisms of the Indian society. Then one of his friends insisted that he go to see the 'great' sage, Ramana Maharshi. My father was not really interested; to him it was just a trip—almost a dare. But somehow on that trip Ramana Maharshi touched him deeply. Father brought me back a book from the *ashram*. We read it together and tried the methods Ramana suggested. I did everything my father did. Really, he was such a friend and guide to me. Unfortunately, I did not have much luck with the method at that time because so many thoughts would cloud my mind.

"I was ready to give it up. I decided I was going to try the practice the meditation just one more time. That day, alone in my room, Ramana Maharshi actually appeared to me. You would call it a vision, but it was so real it was as if he was right there with my eyes open, so that I could actually touch him. From that moment, my true *sadhana* began."

Souris pauses and looks down for a moment. Then she looks at me with a soft smile so radiant that I know that even she has been touched by the memory. I feel so connected to her and so honored to be

with her in such an open manner.

“So on my seventeenth birthday, as a gift, I was taken to meet him in person. I was so over-whelmed then and there, that I lost myself and sat in *samadhi* [divine ecstasy] for hours at a time. You cannot imagine what a beautiful soul he was. I never wanted enlightenment or anything like that; I only wanted to be loving like he was. He always loved everyone equally. When you are love, you only see love. That is what I wanted.”

“Interestingly, that is what a Christian father I met last year also told me. It’s easy to forget some 2,000 years later that the concept of love was really the basis of our Christian teaching,” I interject.

“One can not even imagine the love that emanated from Ramana. When we returned to Andhra, I carried on with my *sadhana* privately because my family said that I was going to be a parasite, and not amount to anything. Not my father, it was my aunt, who was the head of the household because she ran the family business, a hospital. So for the next ten years, I suffered because I wanted to be with Ramana. However, he did continue to appear to give me specific guidance. He told me, ‘You do not need to come to me, for I come to you.’

“During most of that time, I had to work every day because my aunt died unexpectedly. Then we all had to pitch in and help out at the hospital to keep things going. Finally, my father decided he wanted to retire and be near Ramana, and my mother was quite agreeable. So we packed up and moved. But by that time Ramana was quite weak. We only had six months with him before he died.”

I sit with wonder at this remarkable story from this gentle woman. Seeing her now it is hard to picture the hardships she must have gone through in her past. I have noticed that in U.S. there seems to be a tendency to use the meditation and/or the spiritual quest to insulate oneself against the blows of life. Some even tend to put a lot of time and money into creating a comfortable environment to fill up the senses: candles, incense, cushions. The amount of paraphernalia now available for a simple exercise like meditation may indicate that we are indeed seeking comfort. One does not get such luxuries here in India. You get a straw mat and a stone floor. The quest is direct confrontation—with yourself and the hard world around you.

If you want to make your day longer get up at 5:00 a.m. Even though I go to bed early, the day still stretches out forever. At Shanti Ashram I had a library of books to keep me company and to escape into. Here I have none. Little things become more significant. A highlight of my day is when the milk maid arrives every morning with her big buffalo to deliver the milk. Tagging behind them is a week-old buffalo calf. Surely, all baby animals are adorable, but for me the baby buffalo is the cutest of all. After a couple of days, the milkmaid notices me admiring the baby, only then do I dare approach it. I did not want to upset the mother and have her kick over the milk. But mother, baby and milk maid, all seem to accept my presence.

I am quite happy on the days when the weather is good, so I can go out and walk along the beach. However, on stormy days, I have a lot of time alone in my room, a small unadorned shady space. From the window of that little room on the roof, I watch the palm fronds waving frantically in the wind. Is the wind disturbing their peace? I question myself as a reminder of what a peaceful mind is really like.

One evening after the meditation hour, I am sitting with my mind and body in a restless harangue. *God, it's an effort to do nothing,* I observe with a sigh. It seems like the stiller I am, the more my mind runs. In the past, I have had a tendency to roll along, just assuming everything is working out in my life, since I constantly try to be clean and clear in each experience. Suddenly, I seem to be paddling down the mind river on a mission to analyze every event in my life. I feel totally tired—of everything: wind, sea, sun, sitting, standing, eating, and definitely tired of lying on this hard cement floor with only a thin straw mat as a mattress.

Although this house is considered an *ashram*, it is quite different from the two *ashrams* I recently stayed in. Those were large complexes supported by donations from wealthy businessmen, although augmented by income from a residential school in one case, and fruit orchards in the other. However, this place is

owned and operated by Souris' personal funds, inherited from her family. It is really her personal contribution to the world. Two gentlemen are staying here for a year or so to be able to work on a writing project. Some dozen guests, usually an entire family, come and go during the week that I am here. Definitely our days whirl around Souris' interests.

One afternoon a neighbor brings by a video of her son' s marriage ceremony for Souris to view. The Indians continually and unmercifully impinge upon the time and good-nature of spiritual masters to watch their children's dance or music performances, and even their wedding ceremonies. When Mataji invites me to join her for the viewing, she mentions that she thinks it will be of interest to me from a cultural standpoint. She is right, for the ceremony, as well as the preparations, is unique in every area.

"I will watch part of it, but you never know how long an Indian wedding will be. Some last for days," I reply hesitantly to Souris' suggestion. *I may be bored—but not that bored.*

"Well, yes, this one did last for at least eight hours, but we can jump forward through some parts and just watch the important moments," answers the practical Souris. I seriously doubt this is the first Telugu wedding ceremony she has witnessed on video tape.

The drama starts at the engagement party in which the bride is presented with saris from all her major female relatives. Then she presents a coconut to all the guests. The tape then skips several weeks, or months, to the actual wedding day. For the first step, the bride is carried to the groom's house for the ceremony in a special basket conveyed by her eldest maternal uncle, who holds pride of position in many Indian castes and communities. The bride is wrapped in a bright red sari. A red bridal costume seems to be the norm everywhere (except in the state of Kerala). When she arrives, all the female in-laws sprinkle the bride with rice, then her mother, sisters and sister-cousins repeat the ceremony.

Then the scene switches to the men. The groom is honored by having his feet washed by the bride's father. Thus properly purified, the groom and bride smear sandalwood paste on each other's forehead. Then they spill a large plate of rice over each other's head, to symbolize prosperity in their union.

The bride then washes the groom's feet. She must have already had a ritual foot washing because then the groom places toe rings on her feet. Afterwards, he hangs the *mangala sutra,* auspicious thread, around her neck. This thread symbolizes the invisible thread that binds them in their growth toward becoming one in a harmonious life. Next, they exchange huge garlands of jasmine. Throughout the ceremony, the priests are chanting appropriate *mantras* and incantations. In the middle of the ceremony, a veil is put up to signify the preparations are over and the vows will now be taken.

Souris explains that this is a modern innovation, for in the past, they put up the veil in the beginning of the ceremony. The marriages were totally "arranged," so that the bride and groom never saw each other until they repeated their vows. In those days, the first time the groom saw his new wife would be via a reflection of her face in a large brass plate filled with oil. Since Andhra remains rather provincial, a high percentage of marriages are still arranged here. Nowadays prior to the engagement, there is a formal meeting between the potential players in the family drama geared to produce progeny and wealth. The girl can refuse a suitor—but not too many, or she will be labeled undesirable.

Only in Andhra Pradesh does the bride receive the toe rings from the groom. Elsewhere they are worn only as decorative jewelry. I love wearing them. However, my wearing them here has created a problem because everyone thinks I am married. Naturally, they want to know where my husband is, and how he is getting along without me. I am happy to report to them that all men everywhere are getting along great without me.

Daily, after Souris finishes her correspondence, nap and afternoon bath, she sits out on a daybed on the veranda. Gazing out at the deep blue sea, she allows herself to disappear into peace, just as the waves vanish into the turquoise abyss. The waves rise and fall, rise and fall; the waves are only the sea itself, manifesting in a fleeting form of rising and falling. As darkness blots out our lovely twilight, a moon that is nearly full emerges from the dark whirling water. The moon is connected to both the ocean's waves and the mind's waves. The moon causes waves in large bodies of water; the moon causes ripples in the

little watery pools of our minds. I recall that the Babylonians used the same word for both moon and mind. I must think about that one some more.

After dinner each evening, we all gather on the cool veranda for music. A couple of instruments are brought out for Souris to play. Some people are just created to be lovely, to adorn the creation. *Souris is surely one of them,* I think, as I sit in the fresh evening air, listening to Souris' soulful singing. After she performs, the rest of us join in singing a couple of *bhajans*. After the music, we sit quietly for another thirty minutes. Then we catch the end of the news on the TV. Souris seems to keep an ear tuned to what is going on in the outside world.

I note that women run all the last three *ashrams* I have visited: three very different women. Not surprisingly, all of them have created a unique environment that suits their own personality and talents. I like this flexibility in the "religious" hermitages here. It is also noteworthy, that I have no rules or regulations imposed on me in any of them. I am free to come and go as I please; attend services or not. The environments are meant for one to unravel to reveal their own innate divinity—there are many paths to the One—and I have to find mine.

Time passes slowly with Souris; languid smooth days come and go. She is truly sweetness and silence personified. The Zen adage, "sitting quietly doing nothing, spring comes and the grass grows" definitely fits this lovely lady. Nevertheless, the day arrives that I am set to leave. In my note to her, I mentioned I would be staying for ten day. I stick to that time frame, since there is no reason to change it. Souris is a good role model of living in a peaceful state. At a blink of an eye, she seems to enter a space beyond time with its fluctuating realities. She has found her peace and contentment in her little home here, but it is not my life. My home is in my being. My silence is in my mind. My peace is in my heart. *I am not going to find them anywhere else,* I tell myself as I bid Souris farewell.

Chapter Forty-two

The Sisters

The plains of Andhra Pradesh are getting hotter and steamier, so I plan to escape to the mountains. I will have the advantage of the cooler altitude, plus the rainy season, which definitely hits the mountains harder than the plains. My chosen destination is Arraku Valley. I cannot wait to see it since I have been told by some people that Arraku Valley is the loveliest place in the world. Yet, just as emphatically, others have insisted there is absolutely nothing there. As it turns out, we can assume that the first group must have never been out of Kurnool (Andhra's podunk).

After I settle into a hotel in Vishakapatnam from which I can take the train to Arraku, I make myself a huge tropical fruit salad for a late lunch. The fruit here is so sweet and delicious, especially the huge juicy red-orange payayas. Then I take a rickshaw out to visit an ashram on the beach. After greeting everyone, I settle on a huge gray granite boulder by the sea, enjoying the breeze, listening to the ocean murmuring its eternal melody, and kind of meditating on the expansiveness of it all. I have never lived close to an ocean, so having time to enjoy it here has been a new experience for me. I feel content to sit under the shade of this huge pipal tree, listening to the soothing sounds the ocean. The life of the ocean has such patience. The waves crashing constantly, pulling in one direction then the other, yet the seaweed and anemones remain soft and flexible, bending in one direction, then the other, then back again. They never seem to complain about the vicissitudes of life. Suddenly, I notice the sun is low behind me; I must have been sitting here for over an hour. The shady tree and huge boulder are the best means to enjoy the beach, I decide. No itchy sand and no burning sun.

Since the sun is low, I opt to walk back to town along the beach and catch the wonderful twilight. First, I have to pass through a fishers' village that is spread along the beach for at least one-quarter mile. Here I have my one and only bad experience with villagers. Actually, the fisher people are a class, or caste, of their own. Like every other caste, there are myriads of varieties according to their language and region. Since fishing is an early morning enterprise, the men have a tendency to sit and drink liquor—palm tree home-brew—in the afternoons. Marketing is the female domain. Harsh and strong, the women often carry the fish to market in huge heavy baskets. I have encountered several on the suburban trains of Bombay; they brook not an ounce of consideration to anyone. They sit with their baskets spread out in the standing-room only sections as if they owned the train.

It is rare for the fisher-caste children to have any schooling, although there was a public school in one village I visited south of Madras. I was told even though the education was free, no one attended. However, the school officials got smart and offered a free lunch, then all the mothers sent their children for school. I see no evidence of a school here, but there are plenty of children. A couple of the men yell out to a group of children playing in the sand to ask me for money. I just play and joke with them until we reach the outskirts of the village where I figure they will turn and go back.

Unfortunately, an elderly man joins the band of rag-tag kids. He has with thick gold loops in his ears, which is quite out of place here, and seems slightly mad. He eggs the children on, so that they start pulling on my clothes, even grabbing at my purse, and demanding money again. I motion for them to leave me alone, but to no avail.

Finally, I stop and look the man straight in the eyes. Even though I am sure he will not be able to understand a word of English, I figure at least I will have my say. "You are a very mean man. Teaching

these children to beg and harass a woman is a very bad thing." Lo and behold, the man and the children back off and turn around, leaving me in peace. I wonder what they thought I said. Anyway, I heave a big sigh of relief and continue on.

By now, even though I am only a mile from the main Vishakapatnam Beach, there is not a soul to be seen in any direction. The beach is quite clean of any debris or trash, so the crumpled heap of cloth ahead is quite noticeable. It appears to be the shape of human body, but a large driftwood log is partially covering it. I disdain approaching as I pass, but I do turn and look back to make sure. Yes, the shaved bald head of a male is quite visible from this direction.

When I reach the public beach area, it is working alive with people. Fully dressed, the local populace is not here to swim, but to eat snacks and to mix and chat with friends in the fresh cool sea breeze. I look around for a policeman, but I do not find one until I am leaving the park. When I ask him to report the body, he tells me he cannot leave his post. However, he does give me the correct telephone number for the police station, which is a great help.

As soon as I return to the hotel, I dial it immediately.

"Hello," a male voice answers.

"Sir, do you speak English?" I inquire.

"Yes, Madam, I do. How may I help you?" the officer asks in a most elegant tone.

"I wanted to report that I saw the body of a dead man on the beach. It is probably about two kilometers east of the beach park."

"Did it appear that it had drifted in from the sea?"

"Yes, that is what I thought. But I did not approach close enough to get any details."

"Yes, madam. We will surely check into it. May I know your phone number, in case we have any other questions for you."

I give him the hotel number without mentioning I will be up and out of here by 5:30 a.m. in the morning. I have learned to avoid complications.

I arrive at the train station early to purchase a ticket. "No first-class bogey on the Arraku train," the ticket collector informs me. So the ticket only cost $2, I console myself. The 6:45 train finally leaves at 7:45, which could have meant we would be one hour late. In the event, we arrive three hours late. En route we encounter a lot of "goods" trains. They are carrying ore from mines in the mountains and have priority on the single track. The passenger trains have to pull over and wait on the side tracks whenever these trains approach. Needless to point out, these delays are not figured into the time schedules. Neither is the fact that the 6:45 train always leaves at 7:45, according to a couple of regulars on this route. Time is such a nebulous commodity here; no one seems to notice the delay.

A fellow passenger tells me that the easiest place for me to find a room is the Railroad Guest House. I had written for reservations at the Forest Guest House, but ominously did not receive a reply. I am now informed that the Forest Guest House is in another section of town, several kilometers down the road; further, there are no taxis there, not even rickshaws.

Heeding sensible advice, upon arrival, I go over to the Railroad Guesthouse, but there is no vacancy. I decide I better eat soon, as I already have a slight headache from having a breakfast of fruit, then no lunch. This is really the outback; there was not even a tea vendor at the tiny stations along the way. When I ask some Indian tourists about a place to eat, a young college student volunteers to conduct me to the best place, and also to carry my suitcase. In addition, he informs me that I am lucky. A few days before the train had been stuck in a tunnel for several hours due to a power failure, so the train did not reach here until 5:00 p.m. Sure makes it seem that I am lucky!

The “best” restaurant turns out to be the mud shack variety. Sitting on a bench at a rickety wooden table, I order the banana-leaf special—the only choice. Meanwhile, an elderly swami has spotted me and is hovering by the door waiting to accost me when I leave. I detest eating under such circumstances, so I order another special for him. Evidently, he prefers take-out, as he simply folds his plate and hobbles off. I had not realized that he was crippled.

Since the only way to get to the Forest Guest House is by bus, I place myself by the roadside, waiting for its arrival. After a short time, a young nun walks by on the opposite side of the road; she smiles and waves at me. Since I am still waiting when she returns, she crosses the road to speak to me. Since I have already experienced being waylaid by several Christian proselytizers, I remain rather cool and distant at first. Nevertheless, it quickly becomes apparent that she is simply being friendly.

When I relax, we fall into an easy conversation. As she is leaving, Sister Ancy Thomas asks me where I am staying. When I explain my situation, she replies, “Oh, if you have any problem, you can come stay with us. You will see the sign for the Nirmala Sisters just up the road on the right-hand side. We run an infirmary for the villagers there.”

I thank her, explaining that since I had written for reservations a month in advance, there should not be a problem at the Forest Guest House. “In any event, come by and visit us while you are here,” she turns to go.

Eventually, the bus arrives and I find the guest house. Problem is it sits about one kilometer from the highway. By the time I reach there I am dead tired from carrying my suitcase, which seemed small until I had to lug it up a hill. The combination of being tired, not eating on time, and the high altitude are getting to me; my head is pounding. My heart sinks as I approach what is the smallest guest house I have ever seen—two rooms max. Realizing that I may be in a predicament, I fall into the chair on the verandah to rest for a few minutes.

Before I really have time to recuperate, a dignified, middle-aged gentleman appears and asks me what I want. I explain that I had written for a reservation and hope that there is a room available. He informs me that there is definitely no room here. In addition, he assures me that writing for a reservation mean nothing because the forest officers have first choice; moreover, there is no one here to receive correspondence. I assure him that I had known that; therefore, I had sent to the letter to the nearest district office. As he struts down the walkway with a young man tagging behind him, I definitely sense that he is one of the “Officers” that I heard about in Kaikalur and Maredumalli.

After I finally gather my wits about me sufficiently to walk back to the highway, someone advises me that up the next road is the Roads and Buildings Guest House; perhaps I will find a room there. Unfortunately, no room is available there either, as the place has been taken over by an engineer from Hyderabad on holiday with a prostitute from Vishakapatnam.

Interestingly, they are both quite open and honest about the situation. I do not know if she is the typical prostitute here, for I believe this is my first encounter with one. Although Bombay and Calcutta are notorious for their women of that trade, this particular woman looks like a normal Indian housewife, nylon sari and all.

In spite of his obvious preoccupations, the engineer is quite helpful. He volunteers to drive me around to see if there is any hotel, as he wants to see the sights of Arraku too. He remarks that so far he has been unimpressed with what he has seen. So away we go, his assistant in the front with the driver and the three of us stuffed in the back seat—Mr. Engineer between the two women. It is difficult for me to comprehend why a noted tourist spot does not have a hotel, but we find no sign of one.

By the end of the trip, the pounding of my head has turned into a genuine headache—a bad one. So bad, that I end up behind the Roads and Buildings Guesthouse throwing up in the zinnias. Afterwards, the lady offers me a drink, for it has become common here for the business class to partake of alcoholic beverages. I have a difficult time convincing them that I am not the normal American lush, but they do

finally allow me to settle for a plain sparkling water. As we sit out in lawn chairs, I try to appear to be joining in the conversation, but I am really trying to figure out what I am going to do. I think of little Nachiketas' words, "I've been sent to hell, what good can come of this?"

With head splitting in two, I finally declare, "I am going to throw myself on the mercy of the Sisters at the convent. After all, they do have a clinic." The engineer volunteers that his driver will drop me off there, so I bid them farewell with as much profuse thanks as I can muster in my condition.

Keeping my focus on each move that I have to make, I slowly drag myself up the path to the dispensary, now closed since it is after 6:00 p.m. Fortunately, one young nun, who is strolling in the garden, sees me, so I explain my situation to her. Before I know it, I am inside the dispensary lying on a simple cot, surrounded by four dear Sisters who are totally concerned about my condition. Dressed in their clean gray frocks with white aprons, they seem like little angels. In the end, they decide I must have an injection for the headache. I do not feel the need for such an extreme measure, but they are sure this is the right thing. Afterwards, Sister Daisy, the manager of the retreat center and supervisor of the kitchen, comes over. She wants to bring me some food.

"Oh, no, please. I will not be able to keep down a single bite."

"Oh, but you must eat something. You will not be able to sleep without food in the stomach."

"Well, yes, I will. You see, we Americans don't know that one cannot sleep without food, so we sleep just fine without eating."

"Is that so?" she laughs, half out of self-consciousness.

The next day I am back to normal (well, almost), but spend a relaxed day hanging around the quite cool confines of the dispensary. The two nurses, Sisters Takala and Adelaine, are passing out rice and ground soy powder to a group of tribal women who have assembled in front of the dispensary. I note that the burlap bags are printed in bold letters: Product of The United States of America. I muse for a moment over the incredible distance these bags have come to be here in this obscure mountain village. Of course, it does feel good to know that the food has arrived here, thanks to charitable Catholics in The United States of America. What is that place anyway? God, it seems so far far away—not just in miles.

I ask the Sisters if the natives know how to use the soy powder, since it's definitely not a staple in the diet here.

"Oh, they will just add it to their other dishes or put it in their babies' milk," the Sisters assure me.

Then I inquire how the tribals here feel about getting a handout. Sister Adelaine assures me that they are so poor they will take anything. In fact, they are quite ingenuous in finding ways to make money off the system. One nearby village has been electrified three times now, they inform me.

"How can that be?" I question, recalling that bribes are required to get power connected in even a residence.

However, the nuns tell me that a government program gives electrical power to all the tribal villages, in this area anyway. In the village they were speaking of, the electricity was installed, but, eventually, the government official in charge was transferred. At that time, the men disassembled all the transformers, wiring, poles, light bulbs and sold them in a large town. Then they complained to the new official that they were long over-due for electricity as promised. So they got all new equipment—until another new official arrived a few years later, then they repeated the scenario. I knew that milking of the system in rampant by those on the top in all the government projects, but this was the first time I had heard of those on the bottom using it.

That evening I volunteer to help in the kitchen. Sister Daisy is under a bit of pressure since the convent is in the middle of a retreat for about twenty young aspiring nuns. When they have time between classes

they help with the food preparation and clean up too. Since she is from Kerala, Sister Daisy immediately recognizes my *mundu/vesthi*, two-piece sari, which is only worn in that state. I have fun impressing her with my half-dozen words of Malayalam because no one else here knows a single word of her native language.

One afternoon I get an opportunity to visit a small tribal community. I accompany Sister Ancy Thomas, the nun who had invited me “to visit,” and Sister Vincinte, the leader of the retreat that is now in progress over to a small botanical garden. After we stroll around admiring the abundant flowers that are flourishing in this cool climate, we walk over to the little tribal village beside it to visit a young woman known to the Sisters.

As we enter a narrow lane, I see a row of one-room huts with thick mud walls, which are only 3-feet high. However, the peaks of the thatched roofs are some 10-feet high, then nearly reach the ground. The Sisters tell me that the Government gave all of the tribal families in this area a plot of land and 1,000 Rps. [$60. U.S.] to build their homes.

Halfway down the lane, we enter the hut of the friend, who happily greets the Sisters. After a few moments, my eyes start to adjust to the dark, smoky environment. First thing, I notice a bundle on the rope bed. Just at that moment, the young woman goes over and picks up a tiny baby.

“Only a few weeks old,” Sister Vincinte informs me. After we admire the baby, the Sisters ask her about her husband’s job, for he is been having a problem finding work.

While they are talking, I take a look around the hut, about 16' x 20', which is ample space for three people by Indian village standards. The thatch of the high-pitched roof is stained black from the smoke from the indoor wood hearth, used for both cooking and heating. I do not see any sign of a chimney. Since we are at a high altitude with freezing winters, I ask if they get cold in the winter. Sister Ancy Thomas translates the young mother’s reply for me. She says the low-hanging roof is especially designed for this climate. In the summer, it gives shade from the hot sun and keeps out the cold wind in the winter.

On Sunday I am elated to learn that the Sisters watch the Sunday morning broadcast of the epic, *Mahabharata*. The serial has been playing for at least a year, and is still going strong. The major drama is enacted on a battlefield, so it is definitely not a passive piece. But quite a piece it is, over one hundred thousand verses, twice as long as Homer’s *Illiad and Odyssey* put together.

This epic is the history of mankind; more than that, it portrays the heart of humanity. It contains all the worldly, moral and spiritual knowledge gleamed from the ancient sages. However, the truths are interwoven into a portrayal of history, so that it can be understood by the common people, in contrast to the terse obscure verses of the Vedas. Even so, legend has it that when the gods actually weighed the traditional Vedas on a balance against the *Mahabharata*, the epic came out as heavier—in wisdom, of course.

I have been watching the program now and again as I travel through the country in homes and in ashrams. I even saw it on a train station platform as I traveled through South India. Since it is performed in North India’s Hindi language, with English subtitles, I was probably the only one there who understood it. However, even if they do not comprehend a single word, everyone knows the story. The characters are alive in the soul of the Indians.

Set in a tense moment in India’s history, the narrative centers on the dynasty of Bharata, the progenitor and first king of the Bharatis—sons of light. At that time in history, the kings and armies were divided between two descendants of Bharata, who are both vying for the throne. One represented *dharma,* or the moral, ethical power, whereas the adversary represented *adharma,* or the negative, egoistic forces.

I particularly enjoy it because it is full of small details of the religious traditions. We do not know how lucky we are with Moses’ meager ten commandments. The Hindu lawgiver, Manu, gave each caste hundreds of injunctions. All men are not created equal. Being the more evolved intellectually, the higher

castes have many more responsibilities and duties than the lower castes. Aside from their many responsibilities to the king and society, the *Brahmans* are instructed how to conduct all of their worldly duties, right down to the details of their personal life: how to bathe, when to bathe, how to eat, what to eat, when to eat, even regulations on defecating. Actually, the intricacies of their code of laws indicate that they were much more evolved than the peoples of the Western world. Only a very conscious people could carry out these rules. Moses did not even have a hope that the Western barbarians could carry out a measly ten rules—and I suppose he was right.

Not a rupee was spared for the weekly television serial. Every episode is a visual feast for the eyes. All the actors are decked out in silks, satins and heavy jewelry. I do not know where they found the fellow that plays the Lord Krishna's part. Krishna was supposed to have loved butter—his movie representative is truly a luscious buttercup! I have sure never seen anyone like him in the streets of Bombay. Whereas beautiful women are countless here, handsome men are a rarity. Perhaps this is a cog that keeps the arranged marriages rolling. I do not see much promise for liaisons based on sensual attraction to the men here.

While on the subject of Indian males, I will also mention that the men here were never told that "men (or big boys) don't cry." Throughout the epic, the men shed tears and demonstrate affection among themselves. In general, the Indian men are physically soft and flexible, evidence of the development of the feminine aspect. I even noted these same characteristics in their mentality, especially their sense of humor. In a magazine article in which I wrote on the elephant god, Lord Ganesha, I gave the Indian male a good cut. I commented that the middle-aged Indian male starts to resemble Ganesha-"pot-bellied and thick-skinned." Rather than taking offense, they loved the criticism. Wherever I travel, the men only seem to comment on that one article, telling me how they enjoyed it.

Whoever believes that ancient India was bound by male chauvinism and caste should be aware of the role of Satyavati, a fisher's daughter, in this epic. On her commands revolved the fate of the world, for she was the mother of the two most powerful men at that time, Sage Veda Vyasa (he was illegitimate) and the elder of the clan, Bhisma. The sons were duty bound to obey their mother's orders, even though they personally thought another course would have been better. However, Bhisma did refuse her command to break his vow of celibacy to sire an heir to the throne. In his refusal, Bhisma put the traditions before the general good of the people. In the end, even Bhisma realized, times were changing; people had to change.

The "cream" of the epic appears approximately in the center. Lord Krishna, the Divine Incarnation of that era, gives out a discourse to the warrior, Arjuna, who is distraught at having to fight in a battle in which he will have to kill his own cousin-brothers. This discourse, seemingly for the buoying up of Arjuna's spirits, is called the *Bhagavad Gita* (Song of the Lord), and is the cornerstone of Hinduism as it is practiced in today's world. Its wisdom has been known and admired by many Western philosophers, including the Americans, Emerson and Thoreau.

The time had come to fight the prince and protectors of a throne who were not following the path of *dharma*. The many duties of a ruler are clearly laid out. His first concern is the welfare and prosperity of the people. Arjuna had been preparing for this battle against the adverse forces for over ten years. He had even journeyed to the heavenly realms to acquire some dreadful weapons.

First Lord Krishna reminds Arjuna of the down-to-earth, sensible reasons that he should fight the war. When Arjuna remains in doubt as to his duty, in verse after verse, Krishna extols the knowledge of action and non-action, that is, desireless action. Further, he explains, if the truth be known, it was actually the Lord himself who would be destroying the wicked. Just in case Arjuna does not get it, Krishna backs up his words with a cosmic vision in which he shows Arjuna that his evil cousin-brothers are being crunched in between Krishna's teeth.

"So, you see," explained Krishna, "I am the slayer. I have chosen and prepared you as my instrument for this awesome task. However, never fear. If you should decide you are not up to the challenge, I will find someone else to do the job."

So Arjuna fought his battle—and won. In those days the good guys still won.

The actor who plays Lord Krishna in the serial was not just chosen just for his physical beauty. He plays the role, including the lengthy discourses, exceptionally well. I have to wonder how playing these historical and spiritual parts affected him and the various other actors and actresses. Sometimes even uttering divine words can initiate a flicker of remembrance of one’s own divinity. The Vedas say that this knowledge was inborn with every human as a birthright, so on occasion we can get an unexpected glimpse of the truth. As soot covers the light of a lantern, ignorance covers the light of our divinity.

Not only does the presentation have the power to influence the actors, it also impacts the minds of those watching it. The characters are real people who are torn by struggles, contradictions, compromises and dilemmas in facing life and searching for the right thing to do. As one watches week after week, the characters are powerful archetypes that come alive in one’s psyche. I can assure you that everyone in India wept the week that Bhisma was mortally wounded.

The entire production is exceptional, a real credit to the creative talent in India. The dialogue, music, sets, costumes are memorable. They have truly produced a masterpiece to guide and enlighten mankind.

When I express surprise that the Christian Sisters are interested in this treasury of Hindu thought, the Sisters explain that this epic is their Indian heritage. Naturally, they are interested in their country’s wisdom and wonderful sages. I do recall that when I was staying in a Jain ashram, several wealthy visitors went through a big rigmarole to have a TV brought to the ashram on Sunday, so they would not miss a single episode of the serial. Again, they felt Krishna may be a Hindu god, but the epic is their country’s ancient history. How old? Some scholars claim that it mentions stellar formations that date it some 10,000 years ago.

Sister Vincinte, a published author, introduces me to one of her associates. Sister Corona Mary has just completed a book on the subject of women, specifically using Mother Mary as a model. She develops the thesis that as a fully liberated person, Mary serves as a symbol of a true Christian. In an insightful overview of Mary and the Hindu goddesses, she shows how they are all players in of the Divine dream that portrays the dignity and destiny of humanity. In appearance, Sister Corona Mary is a gentle petite woman, but the historical research in her book proves her awesome intellect. Definitely, both she and Sister Vincinte are shining lights among India’s feminine spiritual leaders.

Since I do not want to continue to impose on the good graces of the convent, I have no place to stay. In any event, I am finding Arraku has very limited possibilities for my explorations. Nevertheless, I am so thankful to have met the Nirmala Sisters. Getting to know these special women has been the only viable experience of my four-day visit. I feel that with their openness, flexibility and intelligence, they bring a new light to Christianity. After inquiries, I decide to proceed farther into the mountains—although no one is sure what I will encounter there.

Chapter Forty-three

Unique Encounters

It is a four-hour bus journey over to Chintapalle. Actually, I planned to stop at Paderu, as several people had suggested that it would have more natural beauty. However, when I stand up to get off the bus, all I see is a sprawling cement village. I just sit back down. Unfortunately, since I purchased a ticket to Paderu, the conductor and driver are determined to get me off the bus. I keep showing them money and saying “Chintapalle,” until they finally get the idea and allow me to continue on the bus.

However, Paderu does have one redeeming faction: huge *gulmohar* trees line the main road. I love these trees with their lacy leaves and large orange flowers speckled with yellow, like colorful tropical birds. These trees would have to be some fifty or sixty years old, from the days before the democracy, when the local kings personally initiated such public beautification projects. They don't happen now.

When I arrive in Chintapalle, I immediately search out the Forest Guest House, which turns out to be close to the bus stop. None of the officers are in, but the clerk assures me there is no room in the guest house, as they are expecting the Sub-Collector. In spite of the fiasco at Arraku, I remember how helpful the officers were at Maredumalli, so I feel it is best to talk to them directly.
In the meantime, I take off for a stroll to assess the extent of forest in this area. Strolling down the main road, I encounter a very small town. Houses are sprinkled, not squeezed, along the way. It’s definitely not a cement village. When I look up, I spot huge eagles circling overhead, affirming the remoteness of the area. *This place looks like the beautiful natural setting I have been looking for*, I tell myself with a smile. Sure enough, my stay at Chintapalle turns out to be quite a *masaala*, spicy mix, of different experiences—including encounters with interesting people, and even India’s politics. I thought that in the outback I would be isolated from the political turmoil that has been sweeping the country, but I am mistaken.

When I return to the Forest Office later in the afternoon, I find Ramalinga Reddy, the officer in charge, has returned. He assures me that there is plenty of room in the Guest House. However, I will have to take the back room, leaving the larger front room available just in case the Sub-Collector does arrive. So I am settled in Chintapalle.

Immediately, I take off down the road toward the forest where I find a trickle of a stream to follow. As I explore, I find a large boulder shaded by a huge mango tree. From its long spreading branches, small ripe fruits are dropping on the ground for me to enjoy. I open one and suck out its juice, as it is too fibrous to eat. When I lie back on the smooth boulder to relax, I hear the gurgling stream, the twittering birds, and the fragrant *champak* flowers. I feel so wonderful being surrounded by bountiful nature. My body seems to lose itself among the green leaves and chirping birds. My thoughts begin expressing my contentment, There must be a wonderful creator to have conceived of such a beautiful spot. I could have never dreamed up any place so wonderful!

There is another advantage to Chintapalli, the local people are quite friendly. In some rural areas where the British were not really visible, they created a mystic aura about their nobility, their greatness and superior virtues, since they were “carrying the black man’s burden” and all that b.s. The simple folk would not have comprehended that rationalization, they just knew that the British were the rulers: rulers deserve obeisance. The nobility myth must have taken firm root in this area, for even after forty years of Independence, it still survives. I benefit from it daily.

When I walk down the street, villagers step aside. They are thrown into visible raptures of glee if I greet them with a simple "namaste." They approach me with their babies for a blessing. Then they act as if the baby has been touched by an angel, when I am the one who is truly blessed by these lovely cherubs. The truth is these simple folk love to have human idols. Unfortunately, it has been a continual thorn in the reality of Indian politics.

From the first day, I get a reminder that Chintapalle falls into the territory of the Naxilites, India's Communist rebels. As I am strolling down the main road, I am stopped by a hefty fellow in plain clothes, traveling in a jeep. After explaining that he is a police officer, he wants to see my papers. I inform him that, for obvious reasons, I do not carry my papers with me on the road. I suggest he accompany me to the guest house. Since he is busy at the moment, he opts to see me tomorrow at the police station. Fortunately, he speaks decent English. During my stay, I am continually surprised that I find more English speakers here than in Maredumalli or Arraku, even though this is the most remote region I have been in.

When I show up the next morning, the officer is not present. No officers are present, only some motley clerks who are hanging around. However, even they know enough English to communicate to me that there has been an emergency: the candidate for Prime Minister has been assassinated. As I was walking over, I kept hearing "Rajiv Gandhi" repeated along the way, but I thought it was due to the general election fervor. Now I find out that Rajiv has been killed by Tamil extremists, so I will not find any officer today. The underlings want to see my papers, but I decline to waste my time. I ask them to tell the Officer that I will return later.

After leaving the police station, I go to a forest officer's home who has promised me a unique excursion today. Naidu has work to do in a local coffee plantation and has invited me to come along—since it is in a great jungle area. When I arrive, he has just received the news of Rajiv's assassination and is quite distraught.

"He's the only leader we had, and certainly the only one who had any respect on the international scene. I have not been able to do a thing since I heard the news. It is hard to imagine what India is coming to. How bad does it have to get before everyone wakes up to what they are doing to themselves by keep this country in such a turmoil?"

All we know at this point is that Rajiv was shot in a small town outside of Madras in a last minute campaign stop. He had been on a whirlwind tour for weeks trying to allay his former elitist technocrat image. When he was in power from 1985 through 1989, he, or rather his technocrat buddies, had alienated the common folk. The young men had analyzed that after forty years of Independence India was still a century behind in industrialization. They decided to skip that phase and go straight for the technical, or computer, age. Perhaps, a sound idea in theory, but not workable in a country where the extremes of illiterates and know-it-all leaders predominate. Besides, how can you have a computer age with intermittent electrical power in the major cities?

After his defeat two years ago, Rajiv stated that somewhere along the way he had lost communication with the people. So during this campaign his main theme was contacting the people of the villages and small towns. He felt confident that he was transforming his aloof image to one depicting him as concerned for the people. However, at the time of his death, a leading magazine was on the news stands predicting his failure in the election.

Since Naidu had already contracted a vehicle for the day, he feels he has to complete his work. There are very few cars in this area, so the only transport available was a big lorry—definitely a new experience for me. From the high cab, I get a good view of the stately forests along the way—miles and miles of it. I am ecstatic seeing these uncut, unpeopled forests. I was not so satisfied when I traveled in many regiong of the Himalayas.

Thinking that the Naxlites may take advantage of the turmoil, everyone is expecting trouble, even Naidu. Nevertheless, we see nothing out of the ordinary until we are almost at the plantation. There we find the

road blocked in compliance with the nationwide *bandh*, strike, to honor Rajiv who is being cremated today. The roadblock consists of a wall of framed photos strung on ropes. The most outstanding ones are large 16" x 20" shots of Indira Gandhi and her son in various poses. Giant fluorescent photos of Lord Ganesha and Sri Lakshmi are thrown in for good measure. The Elephant God that removes obstacles and the Goddess of Wealth are brought out for all sorts of occasions. Since we would have to move the whole set-up to pass through, Naidu suggests that we get out and walk the remaining distance.

The coffee plantation is incredibly beautiful. I am so happy to find out that they do not have to destroy trees to plant coffee as they do for tea plants. Coffee likes dappled shade, so all the big trees are preserved; only the underbrush is removed. Besides they have to fill in any sunny gaps with trees, usually with white oak, which grows faster than trees native to this area.

We make a wide circuit of the plantation of several hundred acres. Crossing several hillsides, we come across a natural spring with a lovely pool. The officer who lives on site tells us that there is a tiger who visits this watering hole regularly. Usually, they can find distinct tracks, but today the only ones he finds look a little dubious to me. But what do I know about tiger tracks?

We are in the middle of May—peak mango season. As we walk along, the forest trail is littered with ripe mangoes, wild varieties, too small for market value. Hardly a mouthful each, but one of the varieties is specially good, with a sweet-sour tang. I am glad to see that these ancestors of the modern hybrids still exist.

As we are circling around back to the valley where we started, we spot colored streamers across the trail ahead. Naidu asks me to wait with one of his flunkies while he and the other officer go ahead to investigate. All seems clear, so they signal us to come on. The site is, as they suspected, evidence of a recent ritual done by the Naxlites. I see the flowers, *paan* leaves and *bilva* grass: all the trappings of a Hindu ritual.

“But the Naxilites are supposed to be Communists, that is, atheists,” I ponder aloud.

“Yes, but remember, they are Indians first,” Naidu replies.

“That’s right. They did have the Hindu gods in their roadblock too,” I suddenly get the significance.

That evening, I drop by the police station before dinner. The officer who asked for my papers is present, sitting out in front of the police guest house with a group of officers, including a visiting Police Sub-Inspector. The title threw me off for a moment, but the gentleman’s demeanor quickly tells me that he is in charge.

He informs me that Chintalpalle has a reputation as a trouble spot. Even back in 1922, the local king, Allui Sita Ram Raju, started his own freedom movement. With carefully coordinated raids on four police stations in four villages at the very same moment, he hoped to remove the British from his territory. The Brits had operations in this remote area because of lumber, particularly the prized rosewood. The coupe was only a temporary success, but the Raju remains a hero in this area. The stone prison where the native rebels were incarcerated is still part of the police complex.

“This is a very black day for India,” the Sub-Inspector concludes.

“Yes, whether you were for Gandhi or not, it is a black day for India,” I agree.

As we are talking, another Officer takes down some numbers from my passport and visa, so I am only indisposed for a pleasant thirty minute chat. Afterward, I walk over to the local thatched hut for a supper of *chapatis* and *dal*. This whole wheat bread, made just like the Mexican tortilla, is common in North India, but not in Andhra. I am glad to find them as an alternative to the usual white rice.

The next morning, Naidu tells me that one of his friends had been among the police officers present when I was speaking with the Sub-Inspector. After I left them, he told the officers not to bother me. I

was simply there to enjoy and appreciate their country and should be treated as their guest, the friend reported to Naidu.

Now free to come and go as I please, I finish breakfast and am off by to the forest by 6:00 in the morning. Afterwards, I take off for a walk up a dry streambed in a forest area that has some dappled sunlight where I find several varieties of wild flowers, including some lovely white lilies. Soon I hear the cries of peacocks in the nearby hills. By the time I reach the top, where I discover a small spring, the cries have ceased. When I am nearly back down the slope, I hear the peacocks again. *No peacocks for me today*, I lament.

To compensate, I find a tiny bird nest, built on a branch over the stream. Three large leaves are intertwined in the grass of the nest to make it almost invisible. I encounter so many lovely treasures in the forest; every area is full of diverse tress and flowers to admire. Then I plop on a grassing knoll to admire my world in silence. No matter who created it, I am just here to enjoy it.
Before long, my contemplation is disturbed when the sun invades my spot, so I have to move on.

On my route, due to sheer curiosity, I stop at a small temple perched on a hillock, enclosed by a wrought iron fence. I am surprised to encounter a swami there; one of the swamis who is running a temple as a business. It is definitely not the *dharma* of a renunciate. This swami is quite a sight to behold with a beehive hairdo standing at least two feet high. However, he does speak some English, enough to express his curiosity about who I am and what I am doing here. After I give him a concise version, he takes my left palm and look at it, “Nice palm, live to be 90 years.”

Hardly impressed by that information, I comment, “That’s a good prognosis for the palm, but what about the rest of me?” But he misses my humor. He explains that his English is too limited to explain anything else.

After a short discussion, I get up to leave, but the swami insists that I stay for lunch. I tell him that it is too early for lunch. “No,” he assures me that he eats at 10:30 a.m. daily. Lunch will be ready in ten minutes. While we were talking a pleasant young woman has passed through the room several times. He tells me she is staying with him for a month for *guru seva [service].*

Just when I think ten minutes have passed, the young woman appears to put out two clean banana leaves. Surprisingly, at that moment, the swami gets up and disappears behind closed doors over to the side. Instead of just sitting there, I go into the room that serves as the temple to look around. I place 10 Rps. on the altar to cover the expense of my lunch. While I am wandering about looking over the premises, I hear a couple of coughs coming from behind the closed doors. After some ten minutes, the swami materializes, followed by a cloud of smoke with the distinct odor of *ganja [native hash].* I should have realized when I saw the hairdo; he must be a Siva devotee. His hairdo is an imitation of Lord Siva’s locks.

Once when I spent three months in the Himalayas, I watched the *sadhus* there prepare their *ganja*. Marijuana—tall and robust—grew wild throughout the hills. To make it as strong as possible, they would roll the leaves in their hands to deposit the resin on their palms. Then holding them to the sunlight, the resin would turn black. Using a knife blade, they would scrape the thick resin, or homemade hash, off their palms and smoke it in a pipe.

This *ganja* tradition is quite prevalent among a group of *sadhus* in the Himalayas. Its consumption is considered important in the worship of Siva. I have never seen any evidence of even the slightest social disdain over this practice.

On *Siva Ratri* (Shiva’s night), an annual celebration when Siva appears to the devotees at midnight, everyone used to drink a special *punch* (five), made of five ingredients, which included marijuana leaves. When Mr. Nambiar told me of this custom, my obvious question was “You and your mother and father drank marijuana punch?” Next question, “But where did you get marijuana in Madras?”

“Oh, you could just but it fresh in the market at festival time,” he replied with a chuckle. “But we don’t

have it available now-a-days. We never thought there was anything wrong with it. We just considered it a specialty for Siva Ratri."

In the present situation, I suppose the *ganja* heightens the swami's taste buds, for the food is exceptionally good, and very plentiful. While we are eating, the swami invites me to come stay at his "ashram" to study with him. He offers that the young woman will care for all my needs. I politely suggest that this is simply not what I am looking for at this point in my life. Now I am quite content with enjoying nature.

One afternoon, I happen to run into a young man who is here to monitor the elections, which have been postponed because of Rajiv's assassination. Interestingly, he tells me that he had been in the café yesterday evening when I had a disagreement with the proprietor over the price he was charging me for a couple of *chapatis.* I had told him that I was a writer; therefore, it would be too bad to have Chintapalle's name smeared in print for charging double prices to an innocent foreigner. When confronted, he was very apologetic, then charged me a fair price. The observer expresses admiration for my moxy, and mentions that all the men eating there got a kick out of my reprisal of the owner. He also verified that I was correct; I was being cheated. Since I have been here so long, I know what prices to expect, yet I rarely have to use the information—with the exception of taxi and rickshaw drivers in the cities.

Taking the opportunity of speaking with an authority on Indian elections, I ask the young man a few questions about their electoral system and his role as an overseer. The elections had been called because of mishandling of the Mandal Report situation by the Prime Minister, V.P. Singh. The ten-year-old report had been ignored by the Congress Party when they were in power. But V.P. was a man of the masses, he was the one who promised to cancel out bank loans to certain groups of farmers. He was in office just long enough to fulfill that promise. He also was determined to resurrect the Mandal Report.

The principal issue was that it gave even more reservations in the universities and government jobs to the lower classes, based only on percentages of population. Ideally, it sounds good, but in a country with few job opportunities, it means no positions at all for intelligent young people of the higher castes.

Increasingly, the Indian government is using caste to divide the people, just as the British used religion to divide the Moslems and Hindus. In this case, nearly thirty teenagers, all higher caste Brahmans, committed suicide publicly by immolation. Layer, a psychologist, paid by the government, came up with a theory that all of the victims had been "mentally imbalanced." There was no further inquiry as to why they were unbalanced. Could it be because they did not have chance no matter how hard they tried? The few upper caste teenagers who do attend colleges have wealthy families who are able to pay exorbitant bribes required to matriculate in private universities. That just might be enough to cause a teenager to feel hopeless and frustrated to the point of being "mentally imbalanced." Surprisingly, V.P. showed no remorse over the deaths of these young people.

In our discussions about calling for elections and the need for an overseer, the young man mentions "booth-capturing" several times. I had heard the term before, but I never could quite figure out just what it meant. So I ask him just what is "booth-capturing?"

"Why, that's when someone goes in and just carries off the ballot-box, so the votes can't be counted."

"That's booth-capturing? Well, I never would have figured that out. They just carry off the ballot box? . . . Obviously, it's the ones who think they are going to lose."

"Yes, if they feel like that they have one area that is a loser, they will take the box. Or they may stuff it, or they may put a lot of *gundas* (thugs) outside the polling place to keep their opponents from entering and voting."

"I see. Well, it sure sounds like a democracy—Indian-style-to me. Self-government is bound to evolve distinctly in different cultures."

Every political party here declares itself to be the party of the poor and downtrodden, since they are the

clear majority of voters. Further, the poor are more likely to vote, for they are the only ones who have the leisure to stand in the long lines for up to half a day. The engineer from Hyderabad told me he had never voted, nor had any of his associates. What happens when a nation is run by its most unintelligent people? India's history will tell that story—not that the same phenomenon does not exist elsewhere. We could probably dig up several great cradles of democracy that have been ruled by the mediocrity for several centuries. Surely, no one can deny that their rule has done a lot for mediocrity.

A good example is here in Andhra. Undaunted by his defeat in 1989, N.T.R. Rama Rao returned to his old job on the silver screen in the leading role of Lord Vishnu. The film was released just in time for his 1991 campaign. He has been hot and heavy on the campaign trail and clearly expects to be returned to office. I have seen his face plaster all over the billboards throughout my journey here. He is certainly not a handsome man, movie star or not.

On the day I am planning to leave on the noon bus, I decide to take a walk to Vangasara, supposedly a nice forested area. I would have preferred to stay here longer, but I need to return to Pondicherry for banking. My term savings account is due, and I have to withdraw money for the next six months. All bank records are still kept in handwritten ledgers, so the process of having money transferred around the country is lengthy and precarious, so I do not risk it. I have my suitcase packed so I am ready to head out after I return. . . but it will not be at the proposed hour.

The Vangasara sign along the main road is misleading. I end up in the Vangasara forest planting, not the village. Before I figure out my mistake, I follow a path across a grassy meadow that leads to a river where three young girls are washing clothes. As I look down upon them for a high bank, I say "namaste" to them. The oldest one takes one look at me, grabs her bucket, and runs like hell up the opposite embankment. When she reaches the top, she stops to look back to see that the two small girls are still playing in the stream. She yells one word to them. It must have been "ghost" or "witch," something really awesome, because they turn white, shriek and run like hell after the older girl.

I follow the path they took, assuming I will find some help in that direction. Sure enough, before I reach the village, here comes a man to investigate. I explain that I am looking for the Forest Office in Vangasara. He hears Post Office, but I figure, what's the difference, the Forest Office can't be far from the Post Office. We enter the village and he directs me to a hut with a shady verandah, so I can present my plight to a group of elderly men sitting there.

It must be a very poor village; they do not even offer me tea. This has never happened before, even in isolated Himalayan villages. After discussing the matter among themselves for a few minutes, they come up with a solution. They give instructions to a young man who takes me to a road behind their village. He motions for me to wait. After five minutes, a teenager comes riding by on a bicycle and he flags him down. Then I understand, he is negotiating with the cycler to carry me to Vangasara. So away I go, smiling as I take in an overview of the landscape. With fresh air blowing through my hair, we roll by gigantic trees with orchids hanging from their limbs, beautiful groves of mangoes, and gigantic gray boulders with ferns growing out of dark cracks. He takes me straight to the Post Office. When I offer him 10 Rps. for his trouble, he refuses to take it. I am glad I insisted when I see him turn around, so he had gone out of his way to help me.

I enter the Post Office to get general directions. The only other place of business in town is a tiny government store where the tribals can buy rice at cut-rate prices, plus a few other necessities. The manger there has noted my arrival and sent his teenage son to invite me for tea. Afterwards, the boy takes me on a tour of the local cascades and springs.

Just as I start to leave, the wife of one family sends an emissary to insist that I have lunch with them. News of the stranger has obviously traveled. The family must be the owners of the mango plantations that I passed as they have the only large house in town. The most outstanding feature of their abode is a pet jungle *myna*. It loves to imitate whistles, but he is struggling with the Telegu vocabulary. Lunch turns out to be quite an elaborate affair. However, it must be their normal fare because they did not have enough notice to prepare anything special for me. After a long delicious Indian lunch, they want me to

stay and "rest," but I insist that I need to get back to Chintapalle.

I do take the opportunity to ask them about a TV program I had seen in Pondy concerning a group of tribals, living in this general area. By accident, one of them discovered a leaf that repairs broken bones practically overnight. A hunter had bagged a large deer. In order to pack it back home, he had to slice it up. To protect it, he wrapped it in some leaves from a nearby tree. Lo and behold, when he got back to the village, all the meat and bones had knit back into one piece. They experimented and found the leaves work on broken human bones too. In the TV program, the tribals were insisting that they were not going to give the exact information to anyone because others would make money on it, while they would receive no benefit. When asked why they did not commercialize it themselves, they replied that they were hunters and bonesetters, not businessmen. Now there is a poignant example of the caste system in action.

My hosts do know of the bonesetters and inform me that the Government has come up with unique compromise. Through the Andhra Pradesh state government, treatment with the leaves has been made available to the public for a low fee of 2 *rupees*.

I also inquire about the more scenic forest path back, but no on can give me any details. They say they avoid it like the plague due to the Naxilites. So I head back along the road for an easy return. When I came here, I should have taken the second left, instead of the first left.

Walking along the road, I am soon attracted by the wonderful spreading mango trees. Finally, I cannot resist. I climb over the gully, pick a tree, spread out the towel from my backpack, and sit down to enjoy the beautiful spot. As I lie back to feel the warm earth supporting me, I take in the trees towering overhead framing the blue sky with splotches of green and rusty brown. Anyone who could feel what I do now could never cut another tree, for they are the columns of our wonderful earth cathedral. I know not everyone sees what I see; not everyone feels what I feel. It is like that wonderful scene from Star Wars when all the distinctive characters are gathered at the galactic bar. We are all from different planets—with totally different sensory equipment. The Creator's greatest joke was making us look enough alike that we can fool ourselves into assuming that we feel and think alike too.

Wouldn't you know it? It is really rare to be alone in India, although I do manage it. After some fifteen minutes, some village-types come along. I think they must be mango pickers. However, they are not picking; they are watching me. It must be quite a shock to see me lying under a tree. Anyway, having been disturbed, I get up to start back again. Due to getting lost and having a long lunch, I have given up on getting back for today's bus, so I start piddling along. I even stop to explore a stream for any interesting ferns or flowers. When I continue on, a few sprinkles of rain begin to fall. Since it has not been raining much, I did not even carry an umbrella with me. I figure it will be just another light afternoon shower. . . wrong.

On the road, several village women are running to get out of the storm. They motion for me to follow them. I probably would have, except I am perplexed because there was no village on this stretch of road when I came by on the bicycle. So I do not hurry because I do not think there is any shelter ahead anyway. . . wrong.

Then the storm breaks; a serious monsoon storm. Then hailstones start flying. I am able to find a tree with a large low branch that sort of protects me from the hail, at least my head and face. Then the water begins to slow down the trunk. Oh, my God, I'm getting seriously drenched. Will this storm ever stop? No, it goes on and on and on. I just keep breathing deeply. *It can't last forever, that would be impossible*, I console myself. It lasts what seems like a very long time, probably only some thirty minutes, but thirty minutes under these conditions is a long time. Finally, the downpour slows to a sprinkle, so I emerge from my tree shelter to attempt to get out of here. Problem is that the gully is now a raging torrent, so I cannot get back over to the road. Finally, I find a narrow spot where I can jump across.

As I start down the saner surface of the asphalt road, I look up and see three children running toward me carrying an umbrella. I have no idea that they are coming to find me. Nevertheless, I figure it out after

they insist that I take the umbrella, then turn around to go along with me.
As we return, the going is rough. In several places, the road is covered with over a foot of water. All of a sudden, the kids holler and run like hell. *Oh, no, not the ghost thing again,* I moan. No, it is an approaching bus. The kids know that the bus is going to splash all the water in the road all over them as it whizzes by. Now I also know that the sensible thing to do, when I am standing in a foot of water when a bus approaches, is to scream and run like hell. *But you are not any wetter no than you were before,* I remind myself.

We soon reach a small village—right beside the road. This doesn't make sense; why didn't I see it when I came by on the bicycle? Then I realize, since I was riding side-saddle, I was facing the opposite direction. Most villages sprawl down both sides of a road, but this one is the exception. In the direction I was look there was nothing but trees.

The children take me to a mud hut where a woman is obviously awaiting me. A cup of hot tea is pushed in my hands before I reach the top step. On a covered and walled porch is a fireplace, no chimney, but a hole in the wall to let out the smoke. Several other people, both women and children, are huddled around the fire. They all push me to the front, so I can dry out.

Soon a group of men arrive to check out the situation. They seem to be interested in what "we" eat. "Bread," declares one of them. They all agree that my brethren are *bread-eaters.* To them there are only two human species: rice-eaters and chapati-eaters. They do not know about potato or corn eaters. I am sure they will forgive me for not trying to explain, under the circumstances. Of course, I could never explain anything to them in Telegu anyway. These lovely, although folksy, people are considered villagers, not tribals, because they were not the original inhabitants of this area. Because of the pressure of population and lack of land, several groups have moved here from the lowlands to farm in the hills during the past century. They have prospered with their mango groves and crops of safflower seed, which are extracted for cooking oil.

They quickly change the subject because one of them suddenly realizes that a bus is due soon that will stop in Chintapalle. Everyone decides I better get on it because there may not be another one for hours. Two men accompany me to the bus and give the driver instructions on my behalf. I am content to board the bus and drag myself back to the dry guest house to put on dry clothes, for I remain soaked.

The next morning the ride downhill is something to behold: thick green forests with maximum hairpin curves. Most of the trees are beautiful broad-leaved types that throw shade across the highway. Aside from enjoying their beauty, I am elated to see so much natural forest still standing.

At the bottom of the mountain is the small town of Tuni. I find the train station office and purchase a ticket—no reservations available. But the usual hospitality is. When I ask for a recommendation for a decent hotel for lunch, the clerk informs me, "Oh, Madam, you can't eat in a hotel—not in Tuni."

When I eat in Indian cafes in small town, I have noticed that all the diners are men. The men are not necessarily single, but away from home because of their jobs. I suppose that is the reason for the clerk's reaction: "madams" do not eat in restaurants. Anyway, I end up sharing the lunches that the clerk and janitor have brought from home. They absolutely insist. I just eat a little white rice with yogurt and a banana. They cannot believe that I can subsist on so little, but I assure them that their food is very delicious and adequate.

The "no reservation available" turns out to be significant; there is standing room only. A railway attorney, who was just in Tuni to prosecute several cases of persons traveling without tickets, tries to help me find a seat. He has no luck, so I am doomed to stand all the way to Rajamundry. It is reminiscent of the New York subway at rush hour, except there are no bars to hang on to. The only thing that saves me is that we are packed so tightly that I cannot possibly fall. At the Rajamundry station, I happen to spot the attorney. I take the opportunity to tell him, "No wonder people don't pay for tickets for this journey on a cattle car. If I ever ride this train again, I won't buy a ticket either." Fortunately, I am able to get a first-class ticket with reservation in Rajamundry for the overnight train to Madras.

Chapter Forty-four

Pondicherry Tamaasha

I arrive back in Pondy during the full bloom of the *loo*—hot winds from the west. This is where I began my journey over a year ago—and I stayed for three months, so I am in familiar territory. I go through the usual hassle at the bus station to find a bicycle-rickshaw driver who will charge me normal rates. They really make a killing here with the foreigners arriving daily. Sometimes I give up and climb into one of the jitneys, the tiny local buses, but it's very uncomfortable due to the crowded space with a suitcase.

The inconvenience is short-lived, and I am delighted to be back home—at least that is how Pondy feels to me. Pondy fills my Soul. It has good food for the body, friends for the emotions, libraries for the intellect, and quiet vibes for the spirit. I have often thought, if I ever get to retire in India, Pondy is the only place where I can possibly be comfortable enough physically and stimulated enough intellectually.

I go straight to the Cottage Guest House. Although I have not written for a reservation, I know there will be plenty of rooms available in this heat. The visitor population slows down considerably in the summer, but Pondy sustains me even when it is too hot. I always feel good when I arrive back here. It continues to be a comfortable home base for me. However, even quiet sane Pondy is caught up in the commotion of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination.

I just have time to shower before having a hearty and healthy lunch at the *ashram:* brown rice and *dal* with vegetables, served with lots of fresh yogurt—yogurt is *cooling* to the palate and stomach. Afterwards, I head for my friend Usha's home to let her know I am back and to find out the latest news from her.



Fishermen on Pondicherry beach

Her new servant answers the door and lets me in. I am hardly inside when Usha calls out the strangest greeting: “They already know that it was the C.I.A.”

Usha’s mind always works faster than mine. “What was the C.I.A.?” I question.

“Rajiv’s assassination. They know that the C.I.A. was involved. The belt that held the explosives was so sophisticated, it could have only come from the U.S.”

I do not relish finding myself in a position in which I feel compelled to defend the C.I.A., especially in a third world country. Merely commenting, “Well, what will they come up with next?” I leave the “they” nebulous on purpose. I must be understanding; after all, I remember all the rumors around the Kennedy assassination.

It turns out that the “sophisticated” belt had been stitched by a tailor in Madras with one of those non-electric-sewing machines, which is operated by a foot-pedal. The tailor had custom-designed the special pockets to insert the explosives obtained in Singapore. I somehow glean from all the accusations, attacks and counter-attacks that the woman who wore that belt was a Tamil Tiger. She had managed to get close enough to Rajiv to detonate it by offering him a huge flower garland.

The Tamil Tigers are a group from Tamil Nadu who settled in Sri Lanka during the last couple of centuries to be used as indentured field workers and house servants to the native Singalese populace. The Tamilians were not treated well by their masters; not even the masters deny this fact. Eventually, the laborers developed a social consciousness and a group identity. The fact that they had been segregated and allowed to live only in restricted areas facilitated their ability to organize. They began clamoring for a separate state for Tamilians within Sri Lanka, which incited some armed confrontations with the masters. Therefore, quite a few Sri Lankan Tamils are now living in refugee camps back in India—in Tamil Nadu the home of their ancestors.

No on-site arrests were made at the assassination scene. Fearing a second explosion, the four hundred policemen hired for extra security had taken off running for cover the moment they heard the first blast. However, the authorities were able to determine the accomplices almost immediately. The Tamil Tiger boss had sent a photographer to obtain a record of the event. As fate would have it, he got too close and was blown to smithereens too, leaving his photographic record behind.

The Tamil Tigers objected to the Congress-I Party because they backed injunctions again shipping of weapons into Sri Lanka for the Tamil terrorists to use, but that still does not seem reason enough to prompt a *kamikaze* woman with a belt of grenades to kill Rajiv Gandhi. Since I am now in Pondy, I do see a newspaper and the TV news occasionally, but there is total silence on why? When I question anyone about it, they act as if I do not know what I am talking about-—like the Tigers do not have to have a reason.

I do not find out the answer until months later when I am in Madras and spend a day with the Nambiars. Mr. Nambiar explains that since the Tamil Tigers were using weapons shipped from India, the Sri Lankan government pressured the Indian government to take some action to alleviate the dangerous situation. So one bright day, a unit of the “Indian Peace Keeping Force” shows up in Sri Lanka for a shoot out with the Tamil conspirators. An unusual problem arose when the Tamil Tiger terrorists used women and children to make a line of defense. The Indian army had not planned for this contingency, and just blasted through them, killing many—too many—of them. Evidently, video footage of the carnage exists, so it could not easily be forgotten.

“They were military men, carrying out a military action. They were not sensitive to the situation. The police units are trained to handle such a predicament, but not the military,” Mr. Nambiar concludes.

“So it was Rajiv Gandhi who ordered the unit of the Indian army to Sri Lanka to round up the Tamil

terrorists?”

“Well, since he was the Prime Minister at the time, he was ultimately held responsible.”

Here is another aspect of Indian politics that will floor you. If this does not prove that India is riddled with contradictions—nothing will. The Congress-I [Indira] Party is begging Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi’s widow, to step into the high position of the party. An Italian woman, who never really wanted to live in India in the first place, and definitely did not want her husband in politics—this is the best candidate for the Prime Minister of the world’s largest democracy? It seems the Nehru Dynasty must prevail.

Even old timers of Congress-I are shaking their heads in disbelief: “How can they call this a democracy? Where has such a thing happened in the West?” When Sonia eschewed the offer, the party bosses considered putting her daughter into power. Fortunately for India, she is only seventeen, so no such foolishness was possible.

It’s blatantly obvious to everyone, including Sonia, that the Congress-I politicians want to use her as a ploy to keep in power. The Indian peasants love a hero/heroine, and she can get votes for them. Actually, this was how Indira Gandhi got her start after her father, Nehru, who died of old age, was followed by a successor, who died in office only a year later. The party bosses thought Indira would be their perfect “yes-woman.” However, I never understood why. While Nehru was still Prime Minister, Indira had single-handedly destroyed the Communist Party in Kerala in one short week right under her father’s eyes. However, everyone else seemed to be surprised when she turned out to be no party puppet. However, some did object, so the party split. That’s why the main Congress Party now carries the supplemental “I” for Indira: Congress-I.

To all appearances this Sonia insanity was contrived just so the party bosses could have a patsy to manipulate. Strangely, while it is the real reason, it revolves on an interesting tradition. Here’s the real enigma. Read slowly because you are not going to believe what you are about to read, but I assure you it is true.

Today, in male chauvinistic India, when the husband dies, his widow inherits his job. A widow has no other means of support; there is no insurance, social security or welfare. Her husband’s company is obligated to help her, whether he died on the job or not. I understand that sometimes a son can take over the position, if he is of age. I have no idea how long this practice has been in place, but it is an accepted practice today. Banks, factories, corporations, both private and public, honor this custom. Obviously, if hubby was a corporate head, the wife will not move into that position, but will have to take a lower position as a clerk, something more in line with her talents.

One of the wonderful Sunday classical movies, filmed in Bombay, portrayed such a situation. A gentleman who worked in an exclusive corporation died at a young age. After his cremation rites, his widow showed up to claim his job. The management was surprised to see her, which indicates a lot of women do not chose this option.

She did not have the particular talents that his job required. As a matter of fact, she had never held a job and had never intended to hold a job. Things went topsy-turvy because it was an all-male company—a strict policy. However, the management accepted that the tradition of hiring the widow was the greater of the two choices. So the story unfolds as the sweet, young widow carefully and charmingly works her way into a place of respect in the company.

A more poignant example occurred when Indira Gandhi’s youngest son Sanjay was killed in a plane crash while he was an M.P. (Member of Parliament). His wife Maneka wanted his job. In her eyes, his position, although he was publicly elected, was still her rightful inheritance from her husband. She and her illustrious mother-in-law, Indira, who was Prime Minister at the time, had a total falling out on the issue. Since Maneka was not even the minimum age for parliament membership, Indira won. Then she immediately appointed her other son, Rajiv, an airline pilot, who had no political experience or aspirations at all, to take Sanjay’s place—no election. Decidedly, a more democratic move.

Indira personalized and centralized power. Neither had her father Nehru been known for delegating power when he was Prime Minister. Now no government official will move without a whip; they are afraid to. Rajiv was not that type of leader; he was not really “Indian." He received his primary education at the American Embassy school in Delhi and was sent abroad for higher studies. He did not understand Indians or their culture; you are far enough into this book to comprehend that understanding Indians and their culture is no small undertaking—but you can't do it living behind four walls . When he was Prime Minister, Rajiv attempted to de-centralize power. However, by his time, corruption among the politicians was so rampant that it was difficult to find anyone worthy of responsibility.

Today, the pertinent questions remains: Why is a political party behaving in this manner? What happened to the definition given again and again in their *Mahabharta:* good government is equivalent to what is best for the welfare of the people. To understand why Congress has no allegiance to such an aspiring goal, one has to understand the origins of the Congress, formed in 1885—because it was never meant to be a political party with an ideology.

No one will deny that native Indian lawyers and industrialists conceived the Indian Congress for the explicit purpose of improving their financial prospects. All of them had been educated in the English systems of education. At first they were not particularly interested in Independence; they would settle for dominion status. They simply wanted a bigger share of the money that the British were making in India—enough to pay the Viceroy five thousand times the wage of the Indian worker. In England the Prime Minister made only one hundred times the average wage. The business of Empire was very lucrative.

The radical Congress member, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, became fed up with Indian Congress’ lack of attention to political goals. In 1914 he formed the Home Rule League for the expressed purpose of obtaining Independence. He wanted to get rid of the British entirely and establish a nation on the basis of Hindu culture. His ideas and techniques paved the way for Mahatma Gandhi’s movement. However, he was imprisoned for six years from the late 1920’s and early 30’s, a crucial time in the Independence movement. He died of ill health shortly after his imprisonment.

When Mahatma Gandhi came along and provided the new techniques, which reached the masses, Congress bosses welcomed Gandhi with open arms. They never would participate in Gandhi’s requisite daily spinning, not even Nehru. Nor would they spend a night in Gandhi’s *ashram*, which they dubbed a mad house. A more telling fact is that none of them were included in the famous Salt March. Gandhi carefully chose the participants and put them through an intensive training in the technique of *satyagraha,* adherence to the truth.

This point is too often forgotten in light of today’s politics. The Indian Congress party is a group of wealthy attorneys and industrialists out for their own good. This must be the key to how the British Raj became the Indian Raj.

Gandhi must have sensed the direction Nehru was going when he became Prime Minister. Shortly before his assassination, which occurred exactly one year after India’s Independence, Gandhi wrote a letter to the Nehru and Patel stating that the Congress had been an organization to achieve independence for India. Now that goal had been accomplished, they were to disband the Congress. They were to create political parties along ideological lines. Evidently, they did not agree. That letter disappeared, but it did surface in an old file several years ago.
Over spicy hot tea, once we get the news of political *tamaasha* (melee) out of the way, Usha is quite eager to learn about my adventures in Andhra.

“You know me, I’m fickle. I thought I was looking for enlightenment, but actually I was looking for the best cup of tea. I found all I need to feel blissed out is a great cup of tea—tea *samadhi,* I call it,” I teasingly report to her.

I met Usha on my first journey to India ten years ago. Usha was my constant companion when I spent three months in the Himalayas with Swamini Sharada Priyananda. Usha is an incredible person, very

intelligent and extremely intuitive. However, her life in the world has been riddled with ups and downs. Recently, she has had another big change in her life. She is now working at a factory, the only job she could find. She is the quality control inspector in the leather goods department. With a job, keeping up a household, and caring for an eight-year-old son, she really is overwhelmed. But evidently not everyone thinks so.

She reports that she just had guests: three *swamis* and one of their students who teaches *yoga* in Bangalore. The student knows Usha's estranged husband Hari. When Hari found out she was going to Pondicherry, he requested that she carry a toy to his son Vibhu and gave her Usha's address. Big mistake.

The four of them landed up at Usha's without any prior notice expecting free room and board for their four-day visit. Usha said she kind of protested by saying that there simply was not enough room. Never mind, she was told, they could sleep on the straw mats on the living room floor. And Usha had to provide their food too.

She gets used on the home front too. Usha's maid's sister has been in the hospital with inexplicable high fevers. The family did not feel she was getting proper care there, so Usha was delegated to go over to the hospital daily to charm the doctors, which she does quite well. Due to her suggestion, the sister is getting some drips (intravenous feeding), as she has not been able keep food on her stomach for days.

In addition, her *dobhi's* (washerman) daughter is getting married. He has asked Usha to select the gold earrings for her wedding day. Usha cannot refuse him. In the first place, a low-caste *dobhi* would be too intimidated to walk into a jewelry store. Then he would have no idea what to select. These tasks are typical ones that any housewife customarily performs for her servants. In Bombay, a friend even gave her cook gold jewelry for his daughter's wedding. I do not think that is unusual in the homes of the wealthy.

When I returned from Chintapalle, I carried a big bag of orchid plants with me that I had collected from branches knocked down in the rainstorms. I had planned to send them to a friend in U.S. I had already verified that I could mail them without any agriculture inspection problems since they do not grow in soil. Unfortunately, I had not calculated how much it would cost—over $30.00—one month's rent at the guest house. I had to look for an alternative plan.

As it turns out, Suzanne, an American woman, is in the process of creating a garden in one of the compounds of the Aurobindo Ashram, which is composed of buildings that sprawl in and out of the streets of Pondy without rhyme or reason. I soon find myself behind one of the high white walls that I pass daily, tying orchid plants to the trees. This is not the weather for transplanting anything, especially plants from a cooler climate. However, every living thing seems to be a "survivor" here, so anything is possible. To help them along, both of us go by several times daily to mist them with water spray. Six months later when I am back in Pondy, I check in on them and find several have survived, happily sending out succulent roots to attach themselves to the bark of the tree. However, several others probably will not make it, they are looking pretty shabby. I feel a certain inner jubilation at having brought some beauty to this little garden.

A lovely sea breeze makes the evenings tolerable, but the days are difficult. Even in the mornings, I have to sit with a wet towel wrapped around my head and a fan whirling overhead as I catch up with correspondence or work on editing. The towels here are lightweight cotton, not thick terry cloth, so it's rather like a scarf. I even wear the wet towel turban when I have to walk the block to the dining hall at high noon. Even though, I still carry an umbrella.

On my way, I stand amazed that even this one-block distance is a clutter of India life. First, one has to cross the drainage/sewage ditch that used to serve as the boundary between the French and the Indians. It seems the current officials have at last decided to cover the ditch with a thick cement top. For some reason that necessitates the removal of all the old slime, gluck and moss, which put off rankest odours. As expected, a team of untouchables, half of them women, are doing the dirty work. They are digging out the sludge with the standard bent shovels, then piling the muck on the usual metal bowls, then putting it on their heads to carry it off somewhere. Forgive me for not investigating where, for a young woman,

who slipped and nearly fell into the black goo that lines the ditch, has attracted my attention.

I think, *well, it will be nice to be able to breathe, instead of holding my breath, while crossing the bridge*—but again I am applying logic where it just does not fit. The engineers left an open strip several feet wide on each side of the bridge, so the pedestrians can still get the full benefit of the reeking odours that reinstated themselves promptly after the sludge removal.

Just past the bridge all the green coconut water vendors are lined up right across from the post office. They do not have many customers now, so they are sitting beside their little pyramids of green coconuts and chatting. I have to make a wide detour around their bicycles that are piled up, blocking the road.

These days there is a new addition to the scene, for the postal employees are on strike. There are no pickets or picket lines. They have put up an open *pandal* (tent) and are lying in its shade. They are flopped about like puppies, with arms and legs spayed out across one another. The young men have a tendency to be very touchy, huggy with one another. It bears no sexual connotations, yet it requires a mental adjustment of my Western-formed mind to witness. But the world transforms to clean and white as I reach the tall fence that surrounds the dining hall, one of the mansions left by the French.

One morning I meet M. P. John on the street corner on my way to the library. He is quite an interesting person who is a Communist and Syrian Christian, that is, the Christianity believed to have been brought to India by St. Thomas. It was in existence in Kerala when the Portuguese arrived. M. P. John was the minister of a Syrian Church here in Pondy, but was finally ousted for his liberal views. Now he writes some pleasant nature poetry and produces a spiritual newsletter, which expounds his own opinions.

“Come,” M.P. John invites me to his home. “I was up early this morning and I just whipped out my editorial. Come and see what you think.”

I follow him through a trim gate and up the stairs of his son’s home. M. P. John had scored a nice profit on some property he obtained when the French left Pondy. He used the profit to help his son with a business and purchase of a home, in which he now has his quarters.

After I recount a few of my adventures in *ashrams*, he mentions that, although he admires spiritual renunciates and realizes the importance of their role in the world, he is dedicated to an ideal of doing something positive for humanity. He is particularly interested in bringing up the consciousness of the common man who dissipate their energy and creativity in fighting wars. He feels that manhood is in a natural evolutionary process that, although automatic in some respects, the process requires each individual to make a decision to take the next evolutionary step for himself.

He goes on to explain, “You see, my true interest is the evolution of humanity. The reason people lack satisfaction, even though they may have fulfilled all their needs, is the lack of a goal in life. Therefore, their needs keep expanding to keep them from facing the stark realization: All this material stuff really means nothing.”

I mention to him that I have been reading Swami Rama’s *Living with the Himalayan Masters*. Although it was written about renunciates, it concurs with his observations. I go on to explain, “Towards the end of the book, Swami Rama asked his *Guru*, ‘Is it possible for a man in the world to get freedom from all conditions of the mind, or does he have to live in the Himalayas his whole life to develop powers such as yours?’

“The *Guru* replied, ‘If a human being remains constantly aware of the purpose of his life and directs all his actions toward the fulfillment of that purpose, there remains nothing impossible for him. Those who are not aware of the purpose of life are easily caught by the whirlwind of misery.’ Those are certainly pithy words to ponder,” I observe.

Because of my meeting with M.P. John I missed breakfast at the dining hall, so I go over to the cottage restaurant. Happily, my favorite table is empty, the one that looks straight out over the garden and a

gigantic mimosa tree. I sit watching the soft breezes paint with sunlight and shadows on its smooth trunk and lacy leaves. Yes, for me this lovely nature is all I need to be centered—
something between a smile and a prayer. I observe again and again that being in nature seems to connect me to my most expanded open quiet self. I begin recalling how I loved nature as a child. I can still vividly remember some specific trees and flowers, a bird's nest, bees buzzing in the wisteria, a circle of toad stools.

Some years ago I had had the insight that it was time for me to expand my horizons and experience more of life. I have certainly done that. In my journey, I relish some encounters and kind of skim over others that I tend to classify as ordeals. Now I am thinking that for me the crux of the thing is to experience each incident of life consciously. Whether I am swatting a mosquito or admiring a butterfly; trudging through the hot sun or refreshing myself with a shower; reading a holy book or studying a train schedule. The ideal is to be totally present in each moment. The experience of sitting here relishing my breakfast of steamed rice cakes and coconut chutney, while taking in a lovely mimosa tree seem to contain all the meaning I need. Perhaps I will never have a "purpose" in life toward which to set my compass.

It's not that I have not given it careful consideration. For years, I have been reading and studying: Is there meaning to life? The more I've learned the less I know. My mind is beginning to rebel from so much knowledge. Especially the heady pseudo spiritual books written by western scientists. In the first place they already know the *Upanishads* knowledge, so their expertise is founded on that ancient knowledge. Their concepts are just words, not something that they arrived at through their own experiences. On the other hand, Usha devours this stuff. When I went over for dinner one evening, she showed me the book *Quantum Questions*, mentioning that it is quite good. "I'm sure it is, but I have no quantum questions. Frankly, at this point, my only question is: When do we eat?" But I honestly do keep reading and studying—and pondering.

On the other hand, one thing I particularly enjoy about Pondy is that I get to socialize with friends who speak perfect English. Actually, English is their "first" language. For example, Usha's family was from Kerala, so are Malayalam speakers, but worked in north India, so they learned Hindi. However, Usha was educated in English, so even though she speaks Malayalam and Hindi, she only reads English and Hindi well. Besides Malayalam, she speaks the other three south Indian languages of Telegu, Tamil and Kannada fluently because she has lived several years in the corresponding states of Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Her language skill is typical among the upper classes. Also bear in mind that all of the five languages mentioned above have an entirely distinct alphabet and script.

Unfortunately with her busy schedule, I seldom get Usha out of the house. Another friend Shanta is more available and is also delightful company. On the beach road, the Sea Face Restaurant is my favorite spot to hang out. I love the large balcony where we can view the setting sun shimmering though the tall palms and catch the comfort of the cool sea breeze. Besides they have the most scrumptious Manchurian cauliflower dish. Sitting with friends, good food and a tall beer, I feel totally complete and satisfied, as if I could not ask any more from life at this particular moment. My mind is full; my heart is full; my life is full. Is there more meaning than that to our existence?

One morning, Usha's servant delivers a note from Usha stating that she just quit her job—another crisis. Of course, the job was great pay, but very demanding. I am sure working for an Indian male would be challenging in any case, but she is working for a north Indian male—worse still.
While I was in Andhra Pradesh, she took a break: a trip home to Kerala to visit her parents. Her mother is undergoing serious surgery and her father is in ill health. Although they did help with her wedding ceremony, afterwards, they hardly communicated with her, then total silence after her separation from Hari. She thinks they are now communicating with her because they found out she has a little extra money—information that they could only have gotten from her.

Anyway, while in Kerala, she got the bad news that her parents had sold the family home with its 30-acre plantation of mature coconut palms and cashews. Usha's dream was to return to that land when she got her share of the inheritance. So that security blanket is gone. And I do think we need security blankets in

this *Kali Yuga*.

In Hindu terms, the life on the planet is not in a process of evolution, but one of de-evolution or darkening of consciousness. The creation started with *Krta Yuga,* or the Golden Age, in which Vishnu incarnated as a wise sage to teach both man and gods the highest knowledge of the Vedas. We can assume the degree of degeneration that occurred because, in the second *yuga,* the *Treta* (Silver), he took the form of an emperor to destroy the wicked. In the *Dvapara* (Copper), he incarnated as Vyasa to codify the knowledge of the Vedas into four sections with various branches. At present, we are in the Iron Age, or *Kali Yuga,* which will end with the incarnation of Vishnu as Kalki, translated as "a headless rider," who will clean up the planet and restore everyone to the path of *dharma* (righteousness). Since we now are in the *Kali Yuga,* the Indians often dismiss any trial or tribulation with "It's the *Kali Yuga*."

It is amazing to me that the Indians, who have neglected dating any history, have gone into the divisions of time like no one else. They started with a split second (one beat of an eyelash), then ended with numerous categories of time up to the cycle of *yugas*. The four *yugas* are repeated seventy-one times to make one period of *Manu.* At the end of fourteen such *Manus*, one *kalpa*, that is, one day of Vishnu, is completed, then a deluge occurs when Vishnu sleeps for the period of one *kalpa,* his night. When he awakens, the creation begins again with the same cycles repeating themselves. Well, that's timelessness, Indian style.

Chapter Forty-five

All Is Not Well in Paradise

With money in hand, I am ready to return to the cooler climes of the mountains. En route, I decide to pause again in Andhra Pradesh. Considering I have become a collector of experiences—any one will do—but it is best if it is a new one! If I am going to investigate the unique manifestations of the Hindu religion, certainly Satya Sai Baba cannot be missed. India's miracle man is famous all over the country, regardless of region or caste.

Satya Sai Baba's *ashram* is not on the beaten track. I have to take a train to Anantapur, from there I will have a two-hour bus trip. My train arrives late in the evening, so I opt for a retiring room in the railway station, which are normally available in small towns.

The next morning I contact a family I had met at a meditation retreat in Madras. Since he is an official with the forest department, he insists upon arranging a ride to the *ashram*. Somehow he finds an associate from Puttaparthi, who had business here in the main office today. So off I go in a jeep on a very sunny afternoon—the usual in Anantapur District. Even though the monsoon has started in other parts of Andhra Pradesh, it remains mouth-puckering dry here. Upon approaching the small village, we notice the construction of an air strip in progress. An enterprise for the sake of the holy man, no doubt. Only he and his foreign devotees will be able to afford the flights in private planes.

Puttaparthi, "the place of ant hills," bears this unusual name due to a curse by a cobra that was killed by a local cowherd years ago. The cobra's dying words were that the place would be filled with anthills. Prior to that curse, the village was a prosperous rural community where the chief occupation was cow herding. After the curse, the green meadows and dells began to dry up, so that there was no pasture available for the cattle. In hopes of alleviating the curse, the villagers built a small temple. In it they placed a stone with a red streak, a symbol of the blood of the dead cobra. Here, the cobra, or serpent, is not considered a symbol of evil, but a symbol of Life itself. When a young woman wants to get pregnant she places a cadeus carved on a black stone under a sacred *pipal* tree. To insult a cobra is to insult Life itself.

Into a simple home in this poverty-stricken village, a baby boy was born to a pious couple in November 1926. Desiring a son, the mother had completed austerities, prayers and rituals. The baby, named SatyaNarayana, the Lord of Truth, was unusually handsome and alert.

At an early age, the child became aware of the poverty of his neighbors and would bring them to his home for food. When the number of guests increased beyond a reasonable capacity, the family would try to send the beggars away. But the boy would weep and wail, until the elders had to call them back. However, they threatened him that he would get no food. He did not mind; he was content to go without food for the sake of others.

Later, when he started handing out candy to his friends from an empty bag, the parents took things seriously. They even took him to the local temple where the priest performed horrific tortures with razor blades to exorcise the demon that could do such magic. Slim beginnings for the person who is now India's most famous miracle man.

There are two types of teachers in India, corresponding to the two basic paths to Truth. One is the path of knowledge, which is expounded by Vedanta through texts of the *Upanisads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

As one intellectually understands the logic of the divine reality, ideally one comes closer and closer to encountering that Truth in oneself. In contrast, the path of devotion is based on adoration of the divine in another, whether god or *guru*. The devotee projects his own divinity on the *guru* or god. Through that projection or connection, his love of the divine increases until he realizes his own divinity.

For me, I want logic and understanding. . . My path has been that of knowledge through the study of Vedanta. That does not mean that I cannot admire and respect those who are enlightened, that is, those who know their divine nature—no matter how they got to the goal. I think we need lots of models to prove to us the possibility of a human being enlightened—that we are more than we ever dreamed ourselves to be.

As we enter Satya Sai Baba's *ashram*, the officer drives me past the ornamental gates, down a lane crowded with white-washed buildings, and directly to the office. My passport and visa are carefully checked in the foreign registration section. After they pass inspection, I am directed to the Room Assignment Office where I am given a room to share with a European woman—ten day maximum stay. The rate is a mere 22 Rps. per room. The amount is to be divided among the number of occupants, so there is a small benefit to having roommates, but you do not get a choice.

The *ashram* is like a small village unto itself, lots of blocks of apartment buildings, the temple complex, even a fruit and vegetable market. It is extremely Indian, even the temple is painted in a potpourri of bright pastel colors.

Although there seems to be an air of tension among the foreigners, my first day is nice and peaceful. My roommate is an old-timer at the *ashram*, so she guides me as to when and where to attend the various events. I am glad that I got to enjoy one day of peace and quiet, for when the Master arrives the next day, a cavalcade of buses, cars, and taxis accompany him. Sai Baba is certainly a product of the Indian milieu. He must know it too because he has never traveled outside of India, and has declared that he never intends to do so.

Since I can hardly qualify as a Sai Baba devotee, I intend to keep centered and do serious meditation while I am here. But that does not mean I plan to miss anything! At the crack of dawn, I am up at 3:30 a. m. to have a quick bath, a cup of tea, then some exercises to wake me up. Then I take off for the 4:30 a. m. temple ceremony. The temple is very ornate and is housed in the same building as Sai Baba's private living quarters. Instead of paying attention to the rituals performed by the priests, I meditate through the ceremony.

Each morning as I sit outside the temple waiting for the early morning *bhajans* to begin, I think, this is truly a beautiful activity. Everyone getting together under the gathering rain clouds, with trees swaying in the breeze, crows soaring above, sparrows pecking at the bugs and seeds—
everyone getting together to sing the glory of the Creator.

The big event of the day is *Darshan*, beholding of the master. The gates of the temple compound are always locked except for the couple of hours that there is a public function, so everyone has to line up outside the temple courtyard. Most of the crowd are the lower-class peasants who are hoping for blessings of a material nature to make their lives easier.

If you ever had some notion that Indian women are passive, you should meet the dragon-ladies who are in charge here. Hindu and Buddhist temples always have sculpted griffins at the gates as protectors; these women serve the same purpose. One jumped on me like a tyrant because I had tucked my sari *pallu* (end) into my waist, thus exposing one arm that totally was covered by my blouse. "Let the pallu hang over that shoulder, or you won't enter the temple gates," she threatened. I will admit that it is the servants who wear the *pallu* tucked in, for since they are working they can't have their *pallu* floating around.

While the men go through the same ropes on the other side of the temple, we women line up in rows of twenty persons, with up to twenty rows. This does not mean first come, first served. The first person in each row picks from a bag of numbered tokens to determine that line's position for entering the holy

gates. When time arrives for the seating inside to begin, we are given the signal to walk slowly to the gate. Seems very orderly for India, doesn't it? Well, the gate is where the order ends. As soon as we enter the temple confines, all hell breaks loose, as everyone runs like a mad to get the best spot on the hot cement pavement.

After everyone is seated, the master strolls out looking cool calm collected and extremely conscious. As I scrutinize him, I get a good feeling from his presence. He always looks completely peaceful and centered. Slowly and deliberately, he sweeps his eyes over the audience, so that everyone thinks he has looked directly at them, even me. Although one does not get that impression from his photos because of his thick neck and thicker afro hair, he is a delicate petite man.

The line I am in does not hit number one of the lottery draw until the third day, which should insure me a front row seat. But I am no match for the village ladies, who come in droves. Somehow I end up on the second row, but it's good enough. I feel quite excited when Sai Baba stops right in front of me to retrieve a letter from one person. Just as I am settled and focused enough to get a good gawk, I am knocked forward by the women behind me reaching out to touch him. He stands there for a few moments and gathers several letters, in which people always place their requests for his prayers and intervention. Even though I attempt to struggle out of the bearhold the women have me in, I have no relief until he moves on. Sai Baba always spends most of his time on the men's side. Yes, *Darshan* is segregated, very common in all spiritual gatherings.

Right after *Darshan*, Sai Baba picks out a dozen or so people to come into his room for a private interview. While I am here, he only chooses Sai Baba groups that are visiting from every part of the world—with one exception. The booklet of rules, which everyone receives when they register, states that Sai Baba chooses people seated for *Darshan* according to his Divine Will. In fact, it says that any attempt to use influence will be held against one. However, one evening when an Indian gentleman pulls up to the gate in a Rolls Royce in the middle of *Darshan*, we get an entirely different picture. He and his wife, along with a foreign woman who arrived with them, are escorted to Sai Baba's private room immediately after *Darshan*. After all, donations from foreigners and wealthy Indians is what makes this brightly-painted paradise go round.

After *Darshan*, breakfast is served. The food service is totally organized and very efficient. You buy tickets, different colors according to the *rupee* amount. Then you exchange tickets for the items that you want in the dining hall, which is set up cafeteria-style. The only problem occurs when the local village women push up in the front of the line, so you often find yourself moving backwards instead of forwards. These women have no awe of the "white faces," but they must be happy that we are so passive and polite. They probably call us the "dumb faces." Needless to mention, there is a separate dining hall for the men. I bet the village men stand politely in the lines there.

Sai Baba says, "My life is my message"; not many of we earthlings can make such a statement. After morning *bhajans*, he leaves immediately for a trip to the hospital, school and college; all of which he has established here. He has daily meetings with the *ashram* managers and directors of all the on-going projects, including the new airport and hospital extension. I am disappointed that he does not support the traditional Indian medical system of Ayurveda. Although I am to find this is a trend: you take what the foreigners give you. I am surprised he is not an exception.
Sai Baba is said to be, and calls himself, an *Avatar*, an Incarnation of the Divine. He declares that the Divine has to come in human form in order to be understood by men. If the *Avatar* should come to earth with his divine effulgence at full blast, no one could benefit because they could not comprehend his level.

Traditionally, there are said to be ten *Avatars*. They are all incarnations of Lord Vishnu, who is the god who is responsible of the maintenance of the creation. All the *Avatars* have been of the *Ksatriya* caste, that is of royal lineage. Rama, Krsna, the Buddha—they were all monarchs of a feudal kingdom. *Avatars* have a duty to restore order *(dharma)* and set the people back on the path of righteousness. To fulfill this task takes courage and forbearance, the qualities of a *Ksatriya*.

In the *Mahabharata*, an important sub-plot highlights this issue well. Karna had been born to a virgin

princess through the intercession of the sun god. Fearing the consequences of bearing a child out of wedlock, Kunti placed the child in a basket to float down the river. As she had hoped, a kind couple, of the lower charioteer caste, found the baby and raised it as their own. Because of a special boon, given him by a wandering sage, Karna was able to get an education with a Brahman *rshi,* as if he too were a Brahman. The Guru noticed that Karna seemed to have a talent for archery that was not typical of his caste. One warm day while the student was fanning him, the Guru fell asleep on his knee. Unfortunately, a large wasp flew up and bit Karna, even drawing blood. When the Guru awakened, he questioned the boy about the wound. When Karna explained that he bore the pain of the sting because he did not want to move and disturb his teacher's nap, the teacher knew what he had already suspected. "Only a *Ksatriya* could have bore that pain without a whimper," declared the teacher.

So this is the tough stuff from which *Avatars* are made; they have a tough job to do, even fighting in battles against evil. The *Brahmans* were the keepers of the laws of *dharma,* but the kings were the protectors, not only of the people, but of *dharma.*

There is another reason for devotion to a *guru*. He has powers and he bestows grace for what are considered the Big Three here: health, wealth and progeny. Why doesn't everyone profit equally from his grace? Sai Baba, our current *Avatar,* explains there are four channels of spiritual grace:
1) past *karma,* the personal factor from previous actions
2) past generations, the genetic factor, your ancestors earned it
3) *sadhana,* the self-effort we put forth in this lifetime
4) *guru,* the teacher who can remove some obstacles.

Naturally, his healings of the sick and crippled are his most notable miracles. These healings are often effected through the *vibuthi,* or ash, that he produces out of thin air. Some people think that he has it up his sleeve. Although I have not attended the ceremonies personally, I have seen films of his Siva Ratri ceremony. Annually, he produces heaps of *vibuthi* in huge earthen jars—much more than could ever fit up any sleeve. However, his most popular miracles seem to be the production of gold jewelry, often gold chains, right out of thin air. He has always been clear that the miracles are not the goal of his teaching. Nevertheless, he has to get the attention of humanity, for that reason only he performs the miracles. I should say "did" because last year he entered the final phase of his mission on earth. He announced that he will now be centered on teaching the highest knowledge and will no long be performing such miracles as producing gold jewelry.

There is no doubt that Sai Baba has healed many people. There are numerous first-hand reports. One book by an American psychologist recounts a raising from the dead of an American disciple. Sai Baba went right to the Madras morgue and retrieved the devotee, who had been laid out cold all day. Nevertheless, we are not given names and dates, so we cannot confirm the data. Although such occurrences are rare, they do occur here in India, and this is not the only time I have heard of such a miracle.

However, many people at the *ashram* have been disappointed with the master. Every day there is a line of wheelchairs at *Darshan,* accompanied by a family member. I talked to one of the women; she has been here with her son for four years with no results. When the child was born with such a crippling disease that he would never be able to walk, Sai Baba told her, "Bring the boy to me." When the *guru* speaks, everyone obeys. I suppose the rule is "if you do not want to obey, do not consult a *guru*."

So the woman brought her son here, and took an apartment in the Indian section. The rules are totally different for the foreigners and Indians. Indians can purchase a flat and have it for their own personal use. For the past four years, she has been wheeling the boy to *Darshan* every day.
Finally, in desperation, she told Sai Baba, "I don't understand. The boy is not getting better."

"*Amma* [Mother], it's *karma,*" the Master replied.

She was totally shocked. Then why did he say, "Bring the boy to me." Living in an *ashram* had been a real sacrifice. If she had been in her own family home, the *karma* would have been a lot lighter. She would have had family members and servants to help with the child. She is now making arrangements to

return home. Of course, the Master has never said he heals everyone. Otherwise, why would he have sponsored the construction of a hospital with western medical equipment here in town?

The first few days, I keep noticing lots of hushed conversations and having a feeling that something strange was going on. My roommate finally fills me in on all the intrigue. Less than a month ago, a foreign woman had gone to the bank in the town to withdraw money with the intention of going to Bangalore where Sai Baba was residing for the month. Everyone figures that upon leaving the bank, she was approached by a couple of villagers and asked if she needed a coolie. Since she did, they accompanied her to her room to get her luggage. When they got there, they bludgeoned her to death, took her money, and disappeared. Since this is a very small town, they were caught by the local police within twenty-four hours. This sort of crime is extremely rare in India; actually, this is the first time I have heard of such a thing in all my travels. Am I getting all the information?—is a valid question. I do wonder if the incident was reported in any newspaper.

The young woman's brother came to India and questioned The Guru: "How could you let such a think happen?"

"It's karma, my son," was the Master's only answer.

As the days pass, I find out from my roommate that there have been two other tragedies here recently. Several months ago, Sai Baba had been personally escorting some foreigners through the final stages of the construction of his new museum, which has domes like a Hindu temple. The group had been standing under one of the domes, when Sai Baba turned and walked out the door. The next moment the roof collapsed, killing several of his guests. The apologists say that the guests did not follow the master as quickly as they should have.

On another occasion, several European women had inappropriately spent the night outside confines of the *ashram*. They wanted to sleep beneath the tree where Sai Baba had begun his spiritual life by meditating and performing miracles when he was a small lad. One of the women had rolled down the hill and had died shortly afterwards from internal bleeding. Some opined that she had been pushed by the villagers trying to rob her. Others said she had been quite depressed from not getting attention from the Master. No one knows for sure what occurred.

Because of the influence of my roommate, I happen to meet both of the *ashram* managers: one takes care of the finances and one takes care of the dirty work—like getting rid of any undesirables. A meeting of all the foreigners was called by this bouncer, a real bulldog. He appears in an up-roar because everyone has not showed up for his meeting. I venture to mention that the signs notifying us of the meeting were posted only an hour ago; perhaps that could be a factor. He is not interested in explanations; he vehemently declares that he will personally kick out of the *ashram* any foreigner not attending.

It soon becomes apparent why many had chosen to avoid the meeting: the manager loves to hear himself talk. He does report that there have been some negative incidents—with foreigners involved—but gives no actual information. It is only because of my roommate that I have any idea what he is talking about. Then the manager moves on to the subject of a dress code, and the sin of eating any food outside the *ashram*. He says the *ashram* food is cooked with special *mantras*. The people sitting at the back begin to slip out the door. He yells at them, but they ignore him; I feel sure they have already heard this rap too many times.

Visitors are continually coming and going. Since we have a couple of new women in our room, my original roommate decides to transfer over to "the barn." I end up sharing the room with two delightful young women from Germany. The first one to arrive is an elementary school teacher. She is a wonderful inspiration and must be a joy to her students. The second one arrives a couple of days later. She has not figured out what she is going to do with her life yet. On one hand, she appears a drifter, yet she is equally determined in her quest to really find out what is important in life.

On her third day here, she comes back from *Darshan* in a stew. "Those Indian ladies really make me

furious. I just can't help it; they just push you over, so you can't see a thing."

The school teacher and I burst out laughing, "Oh, you did great. You lasted two days without complaining, that's longer than most of us!"

The barn, actually there are three or four of them, is a world unto itself. For 2 Rps. per night, you get enough space on the cement floor for a sleeping bag and suitcase. I would say each barn holds about one hundred people: three rows of about thirty people each. Everyone shares the large bathroom across the back. These quarters are the only option for the Indian guests as they are not allowed to stay in the buildings we are in. Plenty of foreigners stay in the barn too because of the cheap price.

One day when I am looking in the barn for my friend to help her with a gardening project, I meet a lovely American in her early twenties. I particularly notice her because she is cooking on a kerosene stove. I tell her I would be willing to help her with money for food (it's so cheap), since cooking rice and *dal* on a primitive stove can be quite a challenge.

"No, thank you," she tells me, then explains that she does not eat in the dining hall because she is busy doing *guru seva* (service to the *guru*) while the rest of us are eating.

Later, my former roommate tells me the whole story. This young woman's *guru seva* is to cook for the Master's sister, who has an apartment here on the premises with all amenities possible. The young American woman goes there every morning after breakfast and prepares lunch for the family, including a twenty-something year old son. Here's the corker: She cannot sit and eat the food she has prepared because she cannot sit at the same table with this young man. Single men and women do not sit at the same table together. So she serves them, then cleans up the dishes. By that time, the dining room is closed, so while everyone else is resting, she has to fire up her kerosene stove in the crowded, stuffy space of the barn.

"But why doesn't she just bring some of the food with her to make her life simple."

"Oh, no, they wouldn't allow that. Food is expensive."

"Does she get any special dispensation from the Master for this *seva*—besides sleeping on a pallet in a barn and cooking over a kerosene stove?" I have to ask.

"Well, she does get to have a private interview with him; I think she's had one this year. He did send her a mango the other day, but it was rotten in the middle. She was very disappointed."

The temple and its compound, surrounded by high walls, are closed except for the specific times of public programs. Since there are three to four people in each hostel room, there is simply no quiet place to be found for meditation. I finally find a tree away from the crowd to sit and read or think in peace. However, I still have a lot of extra time. One morning I see an elderly man doing some gardening, so I ask if he can use any help. Immediately, it becomes apparent that I will not be able to do anything to his satisfaction; however, I do engage in some weed pulling and watering.

After a few days, when he sees that I am willing to do the dirty work, he sort of warms up a bit. Then slowly from him and others, I piece together the story of his life here at the *ashram*. He retired and came here twenty years ago with his wife, who is crippled. I did not completely comprehend if she was crippled when they arrived, or became so later. Anyway, they live on the floor of one of the barns. I assume that they never had the money to buy a flat in the Indian quarters. Seeing this helpless lady lying out on a simple pallet is one of the saddest sights I have ever beheld. She is totally dependent on her husband to take her to the bathroom, bathe her, and feed her.

The gentleman took on the task as *ashram* gardener as his *guru seva*. He tends the gardens around the buildings, but his master work was a large plot of ground at the back of the compound, he set to work to create a little paradise. His eyes lit up as he described the special trees and flowers he had procured from all parts to embellish his "Garden." He had a special collection of seed foreigners had brought him.

However, last year, in spite of the fact there is plenty of empty space in the *ashram* grounds, his garden was demolished. The exact site was deemed the best place to put the block building of condos for foreigners—a pretty lucrative business in itself.

I meet several English women here who have already paid their 3,000 pounds to purchase a condo in one of the new block buildings. However, they just found out they may have to wait up to twenty years before their block is constructed. These payments have been collected from some four hundred foreigners and there are only sixty flats ready. When they signed up, certain other privileges were available, which have since been withdrawn.

One woman who had purchased a flat had had a mystical experience in which Sai Baba appeared to her while in England. I find that most of the people here have had some type of mystical encounter with him. I met an American young man who told me that he had come here because Sai Baba had appeared to him in a dream and told him to come. I wondered if he was surprised at what he found at the *ashram*. He readily admitted that he was disappointed that there was no quiet time or place for meditation as he expected. However, he is finding the experience here quite meaningful since he has discovered that he is confronting his belief system at any given moment. “Especially when I go into that temple for Darshan and see those idols and those people bowing.” So this is your basic dichotomy of *jnana* (knowledge) versus *bhakti* (devotion).

One day I finally manage to get a front-row seat, partly because I figured out that if you go over to the side you have a better chance. Sai Baba stops right beside me for a few moments to gather letters and to speak to someone. Just as he moves in front of me so I could get a close look, the woman next to me starts to grab at his feet, he seems to recoil and hurries on. However, I turn out to be in a perfect spot for his next act.

The favored spot for *Darshan* is the covered porch by Sai Baba’s quarters. Needless to say, only men are allowed, except for one woman, one of the protector dragon ladies. So we will assume, only those known to Sai Baba are present. Today, after leaving the women’s section, he strolls over to that porch. He stops and talks casually with several devotees. Then out of the blue, I see him lift his arm and give it a kind of twirl. Suddenly, a golden chain appears like a flying loop, so that he actually has to seize it out of the air. So I get to witness one of his miracles: the manifestation of a gold chain. That is, I assume it is gold. Even Indians have investigated thoroughly the phenomenon to make sure it is not a hoax. Do not think the Indians are totally gullible. In Bangalore, one master said he was going to bring rain to stop the drought. When it did not happen, the usual crowds around him disappeared over night.

According to Hindu thought, we are all divine; thereby, we are directly connected to divine energy and intelligence. Obviously, it is easier to project our divine energy on some unique persons. Instead of maintaining that my own innate divine nature created a certain miracle in my life, it is somehow easier to say, “The Heavenly Father, or *Bhagavan*, or my *Guru* did this or that for me.” Does the person, or *Guru*, or teacher, benefit from being a conduit for others? In other words, does he become a more powerful source by virtue of our projections? It does seem likely. Satya Sai Baba is one who certainly falls in the category of being the “significant other Divine” in many people’s lives. In fact, one could say he benefits from playing this role.

Being a master in India does have benefits. Sai Baba lives just like a king. He has the best car in the state, almost in the country. His devotees claim the car does not matter to him. Frankly, I cannot see him traveling about in an India’s homemade Ambassador car either. On the other hand, he is able to fund charitable projects that no ordinary person could possibly do. Clearly, since he does not have to pay any workers, he can accomplish much more than the ordinary person.

I only stayed for two weeks, but it was long enough to ascertain that whatever goes on here is not enlightenment, as defined by Hindu philosophy, nor by me. I did not find one person who was the slightest bit cognizant of their own divinity. All were content to hail that of the teacher.

Chapter Forty-six

Mt. Abu

The scintillating heat that surges across India in early May will scorch the blouse right off your back, so I plan to spend the hot summer months in the higher altitudes of Mt. Abu. To reach the mountain, right on the border of Rajasthan and Gujurat, I have to cross the major plains of the subcontinent over to the northwestern wing of the country. Since it is rather remote, it only had status as a minor hill station. Some English did summer there, but it was not as popular as Simla in the Himalayas or Ooty in the Nilgiris. However, the former Rajasthani ruler, whom I met in Rajamundry, promised me that I would find plenty of trees there.

So I am off again to explore new scenes, hear new ideas and meet new people. India has never let my curiosity down when it comes to unique encounters. Even the train journey is no exception. My traveling companion is a young man, a Rajasthani—through and through. There are several clues to this identification, but the most apparent is that he tells me that his grandmother has a chest of gold jewelry, which she will gift him when he marries. Only Rajasthani grandmothers will be so flush with gold. He plans to use it to start a business. However, he has several other interests: the most pressing one being how to get me into the sack.

His argument has some merit. He is twenty and has been a virgin long enough. Recounting how he had seen a nude woman for the first time—in an American movie—he expresses his delight and astonishment at this most unforgettable experience. My brain rattles with the fact that, in Indian movies, they do not even allow a kiss on the mouth, yet they do not censor out the nude scenes in foreign films. Contradictions and inconsistencies.

However, my personal ruminations are short-circuited by a juicy story he begins to recount. Several of his friends had a sensual interlude with two Swedish nurses when they had come to Mt. Abu for a two-week vacation. The dear ladies taught the teenagers everything, he insists. Alas, and alack, this orgy took place while my present companion was out of town, so he missed out on all the fun. Now I am supposed to play the role of two young hot Swedes!

I explain to him that I am over twice his age, definitely old enough to be his mother. He insists that does not matter, the Swedish women were at least ten years older than his teenage friends. Besides, I do not look a day over thirty, he insists. Obviously, the boy will not need his grandmother's gold; he is destined for great success as a diplomat. However, I do manage to resist the flattery.

Then he takes a thick wad of bills from his shirt pocket (carrying money unprotected on the chest seems to be a custom in these parts) and he tells me will be able to hire a taxi to Mt. Abu tonight and get the best hotel. With that, I see I have to change my tack. With a straight face, I request that he please explain to me why I would want to go to bed with an inexperienced baby like himself. Luckily, the comment does calm his enthusiasm long enough for us to reach our destination, where he quickly disappears into the dark.

Since we arrived at the Abu Road train station after mid-night, it is too late to find a hotel, and the retiring rooms are filled. As I enter the station office to get assistance, I read the large sign posted by its entrance:

> For complaints regarding corruption,

Please contact the Chief Vigilance Inspector
Rly phone 294, Free of charge.

I feel better already—what can go wrong when I have a vigilance inspector on call? Upon hearing my plight, the railway officer calls the peon, who carries a long string of keys on a frayed rope around his waist. The officer tells him to put me up in the first-class waiting room. I follow him to a large room, where he points out a wooden-plank bed. As he leaves, he demonstrates how to lock the door from the inside to secure myself. From outside, he waits to make sure I lock the screen door properly.

Unfortunately, a few hours later, a loud knocking on the door awakens me. It is the peon with a young German man and an Indian gentleman. They end up talking all night because the Indian wants a job in Germany. Oh well, at least I got a couple of hours of sleep.

On the morning I arrive at Mt. Abu, the sun is sparkling on the mountain top that was washed clean by an early monsoon shower last night. But the next day, I awaken to a wet gray morning. I am disappointed since I know that it usually rains here in the afternoons. *If it rains in the morning, what will the afternoon bring?* I lament ominously.

I always take a couple of days to find the best eating spots. I tried and nixed the Chinese place the first evening; ketchup on noodles did not get it. The following day, I spot an outdoor restaurant on the main road with a reasonable number of Indians seated at it (in spite of the fact that it has started to drizzle again), so I choose it as a likely place to get good food at a reasonable price. The Rajasthani thali consists of chapatis, rice, kidney bean curry, potato curry, *dal* and a cabbage and tomato dish—all you can eat. The dishes are heavily spiced, along with lots of oil, typical of north Indian cooking; which is the reason, I prefer south Indian food. However, I am always ready for a change.

The waiters, or bearers, as they are called here, keep coming around offering me more of everything. I take a small second portion of the kidney beans because the new taste is welcome. Then they keep offering me more, until I state, "*Gobi bas; aloo bas; rajma bas*"—in other words, enough of everything. When they still do not leave me alone, I top it off with a "*Khanna hogyaa*" [food is finished], while laughing at myself for showing off my minuscule Hindi. If India had only one language, I would have been able to progress past the kitchen-survival stage, but there is a different language everywhere I go. In spite of my protests, the bearers keep surrounding and pestering me, trying to give me more. Only then do I realize they are shining me on because they like to hear my heavily accented Hindi.

The next morning I find myself sitting on top of a holy mountaintop with pouring rain. I heard it several times during the night too. The streets are rivers; the steps from the hotel look like a giant cascading waterfall. From the balcony, I can see the coolies leaping through the streets to avoid being carried away by the current. So I am "in" for the day.

Later in the day, I am able to take off to find the post office and library. Returning from my errands, in the cold and dismal gray, I spot a flame under a big tree. It is a tiny tea shop being run by a boy of about fourteen years of age. I enter the establishment that consists of two benches with a tarp strung overhead. I start to sit down, but discover that the vacant bench is very wet. A farmer, who has stretched out to take a nap, occupies the other. However, upon seeing me, he rouses, gets up, moves to one side, and pats the dry bench to indicate that I sit there. I love these simple people and respect their noble demeanor. Whenever I have the opportunity, I show friendliness to them within the limitations of not being about to speak their language.

Waiting for the water to boil, I have time to look around. An elderly woman, who must be the teenager's grandmother, is washing dishes. Using the rain water that is pouring from a spout between the roof and tarp, she catches her dishwater, then uses the mud from the bank of the small drain for her scouring pad. The Indians use lots of innovations for scouring pads: ashes, coconut husks, sand or even a dab of mud.

She does not see me until she has finished her task and is drying her hands on her threadbare sari. Upon observing me, her hands go automatically together at her chest in the traditional greeting. Her face is dark and wrinkled, but she has a sparkle in her eyes. I return her greeting.

Anywhere you travel in India you will be able to find exceptional spiritual teachers. Even in little Bimili, in addition to Mataji Souris, there was a Swami Yogananda with whom I had discussions. Not surprisingly, several sages live here in Mt. Abu. Immediately, I am able to find a swami with Oxford English. After an in depth discussion on enlightenment, I ask Swami Maheshananda to clarify a couple of points on *karma* since I have been unraveling the nuances of its meaning lately.

I ask him, “In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna states that we do nothing; it is *prakrti* [creative Nature] that acts.”

He replies, “Now what you do in this life becomes your *prakrti* [temperament]. It is not that God is ordaining without referring to your past. It is true that it is God’s work, but he ordains according to your actions. As far as Arjuna was concerned, due to his own disposition, he was destined to kill those men. Although it may seem he acted from hidden causes, it was his own actions that led to war. So God ordains according to what we have done in our present life—and our previous lives.

“For example, a soldier has been ordered by the king to fight. As long as he fights, he is not to be punished because he is doing his duty. But once he enters a city and starts plundering the ordinary houses out of his own greed, he is accumulating *karma,* for he is no longer doing what the king has ordered. So if you do action only with a selfless attitude because it is your duty, you avoid any repercussion, or *karma*. We are independent only in our reactions: we can be attracted or repelled at what comes our way. However, we are not independent in what the result is going to be.”

Further I question him, “When Krishna shows Arjuna his cosmic form, it is as if the action of destroying the enemy is predestined, that it has already happened.”

“No, not already happened. The cosmic vision was what Krishna had ordained to rid the country of the corrupt Kuru Dynasty. This scene was what could happen, a preview, but it is not a fixed film. Preordination, not predestination.”

I find my discussion with Swami Maheshananda quite insightful; however, the person I really want to meet is Vimala Thakkar. I am pleasantly surprised at the diversity of the women I am have been encountering. Not that women sages are rare here; there have always been great ones who have been revered by the populace. The thing I find most intriguing is their individual uniqueness. Mataji Souris lives in a little paradise that exudes holiness and never leaves her home except for an annual visit to the Ramana Maharshi *ashram*. On the other hand, Swamini Sharada Priyananda travels all over Andhra Pradesh teaching the texts of Vedanta, while managing an *ashram* and school of a couple of hundred members.

However, Vimala Thakkar is involved on the national scene, as well as having international repute. I like her ideas and have even written two of her quotations in the notebook I carry with me. “Unless one sees the sanctity of life, the act of living is meaningless.” Well, one could ruminate over the significance of that one for years. The second one is equally pertinent, “To be religious is to be able to see the Whole, and the Wholeness concealed in the particular.”

The first time I heard of Vimala was at a conference for teens in Pondy last year, arranged by one of her disciples. So in addition to her spiritual guidance, she is a preeminent social and political activist in India. She speaks at many political conventions with an orientation to finding ways to unite the country to give security to the physical person and give strength to the inner being. She often corresponds with India’s political leaders. Whether they take her suggestions or not is another matter.

Fortunately, I am able to get her address with directions at the Post Office. The next morning, I get up early to be organized to call on Vimala at mid-morning, the best time to call on anyone here. I do find her at home and, since she has few visitors in this remote area, she seems quite open to take time to talk with me. When I introduce myself, she extends her hand for a hearty handshake, which has a force not foretold by her small size.

She is quite an attractive woman, with a soft countenance due to snowy white hair and flawless bronzed skin, yet her small body has a sturdiness that emanates vitality. Her dress is a simple white sari. I had always thought of her as a student of Krishnamurthi, but I am pleasantly surprised when she tells me that Anandamaya-Ma, mentioned in the *Autobiography of a Yogi,* also has been a significant influence in her spiritual evolution.

I had met Anandamaya-Ma myself in Bangalore for her eightieth birthday celebration—a very elaborate occasion. One day I was quite elated to be invited to her quarters for the early morning ceremony by two Indian women. Unfortunately, it turns out foreigners were unwelcome. I suppose no one noticed when I entered the room, but at the completion of the ceremon, given each morning by her husband, he came over and virtually pushed me out of the room. Meanwhile, my companions had procured a ride for us in the van that was going over to the auditorium. However, the offer was canceled when the driver saw I was with them. Although I have seldom endured this behavior, people who were discriminated against in so many ways are bound to have some prejudices—so they get to get even.

So those two great streams of the estatically blissful Anandamaya-Ma and the intellectual Krishnamurthi would have to produce someone who is very special. However, Vimala tells me she had other important influences also. "My father was an educated man; he studied law. However, before practicing law or starting a family, he took a two-year retreat to Uttarkasi where he studied Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Christianity and Zoasterism—all the religions of India. He felt that to be a citizen of India one had to understand all these religious theories. My father educated all of us children—that was the wealth that he gave to us. I received an MA in philosophy."

Then she goes on to say something of her personal spiritual quest, "When it became apparent that I was going to take to the religious life—I suppose I was about seven—my father called me in to have a talk. He told me that I should talk to all *gurus* and sages, seek their teaching and guidance, but never was I to surrender my freedom to another. So I do not have a *guru,* nor am I a *guru*. I have listened to and discussed with many sages. When I first came here to Mt. Abu in the early '60's I had classes with Swami Maheshananda. He teaches the ten major *Upanisads.*"

"Yes, I have already met him. He seems quite insightful. You were fortunate to study with him to get a good intellectual foundation," I comment.

"Oh, yes, my classes with him gave me an important education in our classical texts. Then I was a student of J. Krishnamurti. I went to all his talks when he was here in India. For at least five years, I never missed one. Then one day I told him, 'I understand what you are saying, so I am no longer going to attend your talks.'"

"'Good!' he exclaimed. 'I am so glad to know there is one person who has understood.' He then got up, went into the other room, and came back with a beautiful red rose and presented it to me."

While we are talking, her secretary has been attempting to make a phone call, but the phone line is still dead after four days.

"Nothing works in India when it's raining," I comment.

"No, nothing works in India, period," Vimala retorts.

"But somehow life goes on; it's really somewhat of a mystery," I observe.

"Oh, you're right. A communist friend of mine from Estonia says he never believed in God until he came to India. After seeing this chaos, where the Government doesn't function; the Judiciary doesn't function; everything right down to the phones and electrical current is always out of order—yet life goes on. No one can understand why or how life continues here, in spite of the fact that no one or nothing works. After seeing this phenomena, my friend had to conclude, 'There must be a God; that's the only possible explanation.'"

After we both chuckle, she returns to her personal story. “My grandfather, on my mother’s side, was a great devotee of Swami Vivekananda. When we were small, he would take us to Belur where we all received the spiritual blessings of the great swamis there. So I really had these two great spiritual influences from both sides of the family, my father and grandfather.” What a wonderful way to grown up, surrounded by so much love and profound insight—well, it's the land of the "children of light."

Since I am convinced that it is never going to stop raining, I decide I just have to tolerate the out-of-doors as is. So the next day I start around the lake with an umbrella as some protection. However, I luck out, for I have hardly begun my trek when the rain stops altogether. About one-third of the way around the small lake, I encounter a series of small temples and *ashrams*. Many of which have taken advantage of some natural caves in the granite boulders.

Then I spot a *swami* right out of Samuel Johnson’s *Rassalas*. He has ensconced himself in a cave, to which he has added a stone wall across the entrance to keep out the cold wind. Now he is setting the stones to line the path to his cave, and mending some damage from the recent heavy rain. There is something about this scene that brings up some very pleasant memory. I stand there mesmerized trying to allow it surface, for so long that he approaches me.

I smile and greet him. Then I try to tell him he has a *pakkha* (nice) home, but that’s about the extent of our conversation, due to the language barrier. Since the owner is friendly, I walk up the path to examine his quarters better. Actually, there are two small caves. One has a couple of natural stone benches inside—nice quarter for the hot season. Across the opening of what appears to be a larger cave, a wall of stone and clay provides protection. A small door leads into this one room efficiency. Then I notice that the cave is electrified: One naked bulb hangs a foot above the yellow and green door. Another wire indicates that he also has a bulb inside. I bid the *swami* good-bye and continue around the lake.

Almost a week later I pass by the same spot to find the same swami still pounding on rocks and heaving them around. *He is definitely Rassalas’ hermit,* I laugh to myself, for surely I am looking at a mirror. *You’re not the only one who cannot sit still for a contemplative life,* I acknowledge.
Around the lake, plenty of birds dart and flutter to catch my attention. Soon I reach an area with thicker forest where I also spot a new friend, a yellow bird with a brownish gray and white speckled chest and a rusty head. He is searching for berries along the stone wall between the road and the lake.

My stay at the hotel is going well, for the hotel manager knows some English, so I can communicate my few needs. For some reason, that I have never understood—and probably am better off not knowing—most places here have two faucets in the kitchen. One is designated as drinking water. So I obtain a large plastic bottle and send it down each day for drinking water, although I know it could very well be same water that I have in my bathroom tap. Anyway, one day I need some extra water and run down to the desk with the bottle. At that moment, all the staff—the manager, desk clerk, the cook, the cleaning boys—are all standing around the desk. When I ask for water, the manager takes the empty bottle from me, he hands it to the desk clerk, who hands it to the cook, who hands it to the assistant cook, who hands it to the small boy who helps clean, telling the lad to go get the water.

“I can’t believe what I just witnessed!” I exclaim. This is a scenario in living color of how any task is accomplished in India. Honestly, I have seen a man sitting in a chair observing a worker laying some brick. In Pondy, an overseer always sits at the door to watch the girls clean the rooms in the guest house.

Then there are other cultural encounters. One night I cannot sleep for music blasting over a loud speaker at the polo grounds until 2:00 a.m. Well, at first there was music, then several lectures, ending with one that sounded very preachy, just like someone begging, extolling. It definitely sounded as if they were trying to sell something. *It does sound like one, but it couldn’t be a Christian preacher, not in this outback,* I assure myself, because the whole thing started out with some Vedic chants.

“What was going on last night that they were blaring noise half the night?” I query the hotel manager the next morning.

“Some program in town,” he answers.

“But what were they talking about during that last hour?”

“Oh, there were several religious functions, that last one was some Christian preacher.”

“Christian...? I knew it.”

“Are you Christian?” he asks me.

“You don’t think I would admit it after last night’s disturbance, do you?”

Will somebody please tell me how that Indian preacher has mastered the Christian intonations so that he sounds exactly like Elmer Gantry?

After a week, the full moon of July appears—it is the full moon that honors the teacher, *Guru Poornima*. I reminisce that it’s been exactly a year since I celebrated the occasion in Hampi. For the *guru’s* special day several people are coming here to give a music concert for Vimala. She invited me to join them. Someone has labeled music as the universal language, and I feel that is true. Good classical music of any culture can communicate a full scale of emotions. Not surprisingly, the Indians have even named them. The two musicians are teen-age girls who won first place in Gujurati state competitions in their age group. However, they only play music as a spiritual practice and recently turned down the opportunity to go to Bombay for a professional performance. Vimala definitely approved of their decision.

Before the music begins, she gives a short talk on the value of music in our lives. First, she emphasizes that the strains of music are healing. Since the creation ismade from sound, as well as light, playing and listening to music is a *sadhana* (spiritual practice) to purify the neurological make-up of the body, that is, to remove the imbalances.

She continues to explain that all *sadhanas* are for the purpose of purifying the physical/psycho-physical element of the seeker. Enlightenment is a by-product, or a corollary, of that purification. In the case of music, purification comes from both the sound waves, as well as the light inherent in the sound of spiritual or classical music.

When the musicians are ready to play, Vimala reminds us that Indian music is not listened to with the ears, but with the physical body. I seem to catch the knack of listening with the body rather easily. As I relax into the notes of the sitar, I experience that the sounds penetrate right to the heart. I feel grateful to be here today in such an uplifting atmosphere.

I have made a new discovery: thermos cooking. My stomach had begun to rebel against the heavy north Indian cuisine; plus the weather continues to be so bleak that many times I cannot get out because of heavy rain. The idea is great for cooking hot breakfast cereals—with no burnt, sticky pan to clean. The cracked wheat I find in the market here cooks in a couple of hours. I am really enjoying having a hot breakfast on these cold mornings. However, I am leery that my 220-volt coil will hold out with all the use. I doubt I will be able to find a replacement here. For lunch, I cooked carrots with butter and fresh chopped coriander, along with the cracked wheat—no spices. I am spiced out for now.

As the dreary days pass and the mold starts to grow on my suitcase, backpack and camera bag, I find that one of my favorite pastimes is thumbing through my travel guide. I am searching for the nearest place that will not have such a heavy monsoon, yet will be a refuge from the heat. I picked Pushkar as the most likely place.

Before leaving I go by Vimala’s to wish her farewell. After some general talk, I draw her into another discussion about herself. I am always interested in a person’s life story, specially these women who have chosen a spiritual life. It’s noteworthy how the influence of their fathers played an important role. She recounts that when she was only about twelve that she ran away from home to meet Anandamaya-Ma and to ask her for *sannyasa*, the renunciation vows.

“As soon as I arrived, Amma sent a telegram to father informing him that his daughter was safe in her care. Then she told me, ‘My dear, *sannyasa* is in the heart, not in some cloth. You continue with your studies. You begin with the heart.’ Then I was put on the next train home to my father, accompanied by a *brahmacharini*.”

“You were sure fortunate to have the influence of such great saints in your life.”

“Yes, I was fortunate to be born into a spiritual family. I knew from a young age, about six or seven, that I only was interested in the spiritual life and spiritual pursuits. So I was saved from getting involved in, and bogged down by, the world, then having to pull myself out of it. It was much easier this way.”

“I can certainly imagine, but not from first-hand experience. I had never even heard of a life of spiritual pursuits at that age. My life was oriented outward totally: How to make your way in the world—while managing to avoid God’s punishments, of course.”

Later, in the course of conversation, I mention that I had also visited Satya Sai Baba’s *ashram*, since he is THE Indian phenomena today. I end my observations with the comment, “I am sure some of his miracles are authentic, but I’m interested in transformation—that’s the real miracle.”

“But through your contact with Swami Chinmayananda and other teachers, you must have made some changes in these past years.”

“Well, yes, if you put it that way. I am less unconscious; that is, I am more aware of my feelings, motives, intentions, and inhibitions. Definitely, I am less fearful. Also, I am more conscious of other people and their journeys in life, which gives me a lot of compassion. But I am also aware of all the time I’ve wasted getting carried away with numerous projects, planning to have time for meditation—some day.”

“So now you feel you want to move to a deeper level of experience?”

“Yes, that is true. Yet, I value your concept that meditation includes the whole being—all of life. Intrinsically, I know this to be true; yet I remain hard on myself. I remember Krishnamurti said when he went on walks he never recalled having even a single thought. Whereas, I have so many.”

She replies, “Well, he may not be a valid measuring stick for you. K never studied philosophy. He only went through high school. He had not filled his head with so many ideas and concepts that we need to live in today’s complex world. Remember too that his every need was always taken care of. He never needed to deal with matters in the material world, like yourself.

“Your thoughts are the momentum of all your past physical and mental activities. It’s inevitable that you have many thoughts.”

“I have been aware that Krishnamurthi was always taken care of. It is true he did not have to work one day of his life. You’re right; he’s not really a model for someone like me, who will have to work to support myself financially for the rest of my life.”

“He was unique,” she remarks reflectively.

“Unfortunately, that book has recently come out about a long-term affair he was carrying on with his manager’s wife.”

“Yes, it is unfortunate. If there were any charges to be made, they should have been brought out while he was still alive, so that he could refute them.”

“That’s true, but there are stories that, when crossed, Krishnamurti could be ruthless. These sexual scandals have been a common occurrence with India’s holy men in the Western countries, although many are kept secret. I think this book brings out what has been bothering me about these situations. I have thought about this *guru*/sex thing because I want to be open. I do not want to be run by any puritanical conditioning.

"However, I have concluded that there is always another person involved. Shouldn't these teachers be aware of the guilt—and just plain confusion—this secrecy is causing in their partners? Anyway, if they are seeing everyone equally, as the scriptures say an enlightened person does, why do they always pick the youngest and prettiest?"

Vimala laughs, but declines to make any further comment.

After a few moments of silence, I mention that in spite of the chaos, corruption, contradiction and just plain filth, India still continues to produce saints.

"You are very perceptive to be able to make that observation. In spite of all of India's negativity that is so overwhelming, her spirituality is one great treasure that she continues to give to the world."

"In spite of it all, that treasure endures," I agree with her, as I get up to leave.

I feel truly grateful that I have met three special teachers—I consider Swamini Sharada that Priyananda is a sage, Mataji Souris is a saint, while it seems that Vimala Thakkar is actually both. Nevertheless, they all gave me the same personal advice. They say silence of the mind is the most important *sadhana*. Vimala told me, "It is the exposure to the silence that loosens the grip of the conditionings on the brain and leads to their becoming ineffective. It is the period of total silence, or non-movement of the mind, that activates energies lying dormant in us."

India does continue to produce saints in spite of contradictions and inconsistencies—or maybe it's because of them.

Land of Kings

During the pleasant train journey to Ajmer, I pass the hilly area that is typical of southern Rajasthan. Rajasthan, the land of monarchs, is as unique as any other part of India. The princely caste, the Rajputs, "sons of kings," are half native stock, with the other half a mix of Hun and Scythian blood, donated by former invaders. Known for their outstanding valor throughout their history, the Rajputs were often contracted to fight for contenders to the throne in Delhi. First they fought with the Moguls, then against the war-mongrel Mogul, Aurangbad, and later for the British. Unfortunately, neither were they adverse to fighting among themselves. The present epic of Rajput—therefore, Indian—history may have been different had they been united to fight against the British.

I had been in Rajasthan ten years ago when I was traveling with Swami Chinmayananda. It appears to me that here one finds all the best and worst of the treatment of women. Much of Rajasthan is desert, therefore, poverty-stricken, so this contributes to some extent to the polarization of cultural mores. On one journey, I shared a compartment with four young men from Jodhpur. They were all married, traveling first class, indicating that they were middle-class types. As always, they were quite open about discussing their personal affairs. As it turns out, one of them was unmarried because he had an older unmarried sister; therefore, he was ineligible until that burden was lifted. That is, no one would contract a marriage with him for fear he might have to support his unmarried sister. I know another *Brahman* woman in Madras who no one would marry because she was the sole support of her widowed mother. On the other hand, there are fewer unmarried women here; their marriage is a family responsibility. And the women want to marry. Several educated Indians have mentioned to me the sad state of so many American women who have to remain spinsters all their lives. I mention to them that many American women are quite happy in their unmarried state, but the Indians will never understand.

Since we were pulling into Jodhpur late, the young men who were my traveling companions were concerned for me. Although they knew Jodhpur well, they had never heard of the address I had been given, which was the home of the gentleman who had organized Swami Chinmayananda's lectures. One of them even volunteered that I better go to his home for the night, but frankly I feared causing a family problem for him in case his wife happened to be a jealous type. I decided to stay in the train station, so I slept on a rope bed—a first for me—in the ladies' waiting room. This is the common mattress throughout rural India. The ropes are tied in knots in a lattice pattern, which provide a sturdy enough support, but not exactly made for comfort.

After a leisurely breakfast at the station restaurant, I rounded up one of the railroad officials and an elderly gentleman who spoke English to give instructions to the rickshaw driver. I had been in India long enough to know that it is best to set up a conference among the locals if you are going to an unknown place. Yes, they knew the place, but it was a military cantonment.

With some reservations, we took off in the right direction, hardly knowing what to expect. As it turned out, the address was indeed a military headquarters, but my driver had the good sense to inquire for the exact name of the family. We were instructed to go behind the tall stone wall to the servants' quarters. That seemed strange, until I saw the place: a large stone two-story building. I inquired and was told that this was the Singh's home.

When I met them, I got the whole story. Mr. Singh's grandfather, a Rajput nobleman, had been awarded

this property from the Jodhpur monarch for outstanding services rendered in battle. You may remember in the movie *Gandhi*, Sardar Patel had been running about the country and finally obtained the last signature of kings of the 565 kingdoms, large and small, that had not come directly under British rule during the Empire. Some of the kingdoms were quite large, particularly here in Rajasthan, and were ruled by traditional kings. They were the 235 monarchs who qualified for a seat in the Chamber of Princes, formed in 1921. The remaining 330 were small holdings administered by ministers, former generals as with the Singh's holdings, and even *zamindars* (landlords) with large properties, particularly in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa.

Mr. Singh's grandfather's dominion was small, but included enough land to grow sufficient crops to support a palace and staff. One of the reasons that Sardar Patel had been able to secure the signatures from all regents and landlords was that they were allowed to keep their personal holdings. In addition, they would receive a monthly stipend from the Government. That was in 1947. In 1971, the amendment giving privy purses to the ex-regents was eliminated from the Constitution. The payments had been a heavy burden on the country's budget, but their purpose had been served. No one could argue that India could no longer afford to support 565 regents.
So in 1971, these feudal lords were left to fend for themselves. Those with large holdings could easily survive; some turned their summer palaces into hotels; others held vast agricultural lands. However, the smaller ones had fewer options. The Singh family had rented their ancestral palace out to the military, and now were living in the former servants' quarters. Fortunately, they had been generous to their servants, so their present home was quite ample and adequate for the small family: Mr. Singh, his wife, one young son, and his mother.

The mother was in the *vanaprastha*, retirement, phase of her life, so she lived the traditional semi-ascetic life, spending most of her day in the prayer room. She seemed quite content and only asked that her food be cooked by a Rajput. She had given up everything for the sake of Democracy, but to have her food cooked by a low caste *shudra* would have been the last straw. By the way, she informed me that all Americans are *shudras*, the service caste.

For me, this visit had been a memorable occasion because it was the one and only time I ever encountered a ghost. In general, many Rajput castles are said to be haunted, but this building had been the servants' quarters. Be that as it may, Mrs. Singh had mentioned that there was a ghost hanging around that sometimes bothered her. Naturally, I rejected the idea with my usual Yankee skepticism.

Then one night, I was awakened suddenly, like I had been startled by something. It was unusual, but I did not think anything about it. Then the following night, rather early in morning, I seemed to be half-awake, yet I was dreaming that someone was trying to kiss me on the mouth. I was puzzled and tried to push him away. When I did, a powerful force grabbed my neck and shoved my face into the pillow. I really felt that I was being seriously suffocated. After a real struggle—by then I was totally awake—I finally managed to turn over and get my face out of the pillow. No longer a skeptic, I told Mrs. Singh she had better find someone to exorcise that ghost.

I had recently been told of such an exorcism when I visited the *Shringeri Matha* in Karnataka. In a nearby village, a young girl seemed to be possessed by a spirit and was displaying extremely bizarre behavior. They called the Shingeri pontiff to the village to solve the problem. Using his intuitive power, he looked into the situation and found that, just prior to the difficulty, a man had died in the village. Due to a sudden downpour during the funeral ceremonies, the ritual at his cremation had not been completed. No one thought anything about it, but the man, in spirit form, was furious. He began to plague anyone he could to get the villagers' attention. The *acharya* simply ordered that the complete ritual be performed again. The village priest carried out the instructions and that was the end of the problem.

The younger Mrs. Singh was quite effusive and open. One day she confided in me another story of the trials of being a woman in India. Her younger sister had committed suicide. Apparently, there was a "love" relationship involved, but since the sister was attending a foreign university no one knew what happened: "We have no idea at all."

I asked if she thought the sister had been jilted. She replied that it certainly was a possibility. One might assume the broken relationship would have been intimate for the young woman to be in such despair, but it's not necessarily so. Just having been engaged was a point against her, having been engaged to a foreigner was another nine points against her. She could have never married in India. Another tragedy for an Indian woman who dared to love.

One aftrenoon, all of us stuffed into a car and took off through the desert some ten miles outside of the city. There we visited a woman, about sixty years of age, who was considered a saint by the locals. I cannot confirm her spiritual attainment, but she certainly was a very interesting phenomenon. She had not eaten food or drunk any water for some thirty years.

Widowed at a young age, she could not marry either. The Rajasthan territory was one of the foremost practitioners of *sati,* where the wife, or sometimes wives, accompanied her husband to heaven via the funeral pyre.

Sati was truly an act of the deepest devotion to the husband. Of course, the woman believed in reincarnation and often wanted to continue the next life with the same man. Once I found the same sentiment in an anonymous English elegy: "When two souls have finally found each other, there is established between them a union which begins on earth and continues forever in heaven." To the women's minds *sati* was not a horrible thing, but a tribute to their love. Throughout Rajasthan, one will find monuments to commemorate their act of devotion.

Sati has been outlawed; first by the British, then by the Indian Republic. However, the practice was slow in dying among the Rajput nobles. There continues to be an occasional infraction of the law. Even today in such cases, the woman continues to be deified by other women.

The practice may have begun when the women of besieged towns immolated themselves to avoid capture and the inevitable ravaging by the Muslim conquerors. The most famous case occurred in Chittor where three different times in 1303, 1535 and finally in 1585, the city was attacked. Finally, knowing that defeat was inevitable, the men rode out to face certain death dressed in the orange robes of renunciation, while all the women of the town committed *sati.* After the third raid, Chittor was not rebuilt and remains a ruin.

Many customs in Rajasthan have grown out of their fear of Muslim conquerors. For example, the women practiced a type of *purdah,* keeping their faces covered with the end of their *sari* when in public. Their living quarters were always on the second floor for security. The rooms had latticed windows, so they could observe the world below without showing their faces.

Although the law has eliminated *sati,* the government has not provided sustenance for the widow if the family does not help her. Unfortunately, in poorer families, the young widow is left to fend for herself in a cultural milieu that has no place for her. In the case of the woman we were visiting, she had one saving grace: one son, only about twelve years at the time. He gave her a reason to live. Besides, he would soon grow up, marry, and support his mother. However, within a few months of the death of her husband, the son was killed in an accident. The distraught widow headed for the desert to die.

Sitting out in the hot sun for days without food or water, she awaited Lord Death's arrival. She could not return home for she had none. Her parents would not take her back after her marriage, and her husband's family did not want the burden. Even VijayaJayaLaksmi Nehru, the sister of the future Prime Minister, suffered deplorable treatment at her husband's death. Without an excuse, her in-laws actually robbed of her husband's business holdings.

In the present case, after several months, it became apparent that the woman probably was not going to die. Sometimes the local villagers would pass that way, looking for forage for their animals. They noticed her, but left her alone. However, as time passed, they began to question her and found out her plight. They offered to bring her some food, but she refused. If she was doomed to live, the gods would have to sustain her; she would take no food. The village men insisted upon helping her to build a little shelter

from the sun.

After some years, several young women came to stay with her, treating her as a spiritual guide, honoring the fact that she had conquered death. Nevertheless, the disciples had to have food and water. The teacher divined the spot where they would find water. So she moved down the wash to the site of the well where they now live in simple mud huts. The widow remains alive and very well. The Rajasthani prince I met in Rajamundry told me that there are many such women in Jodhpur.

So this is my second trip to the land of the kings. I arrive in Ajmer in the afternoon, which gives me plenty of time to find a place to spend the night and to look around. Although the town seems quite small, it has historical significance. Here in the Ajmer palace in 1616 was the first official encounter of East and West. Sir Thomas Roe, the ambassador of King James I of England, presented his credentials to the Emperor Jahangir, the heir of the illustrious Empire-builder Akbar. Even today, it remains a holy pilgrimage destination for Muslims to honor the great Akbar.

In the central district, the highlight is a Jain temple. As you enter, you are warned by a sign: “Smoking and chewing of beetles is prohibited”—referring to the nut of the betel tree used for *paan*. Inside large glassed galleries hold two scenes: the first of a golden mountain, fashioned of 150 kilos of gold, representing Mahavir’s birthplace in Bihar. Second, a replica of all the Jain temples in India constructed with 850 kilos of gold. Built by a wealthy diamond merchant in 1865, twenty master craftsman worked for fifty years to complete the temple and its contents. The merchant’s family still live in Ajmer—with diamonds embedded in designs on the ceilings of their home—I am informed. The founder of the Jain religion, Mahavir, was a contemporary of Buddha. Early the next morning, a short bus ride lands me in Pushkar. Since Mt. Abu cost me double my usual budget for food and lodging, I am happy to find out that prices at this pilgrim center are dirt cheap. The tiny village of Pushkar has all the best of India—sun, color, flowers, temples, sacred cows and a holy lake. You can enjoy it for only $5 a day, up to $25 a day if you prefer to stay in an old palace.



Pushkar Lake and Ghats/Steps

Since I have the whole day ahead of me, I leisurely check out the place before deciding where to stay. The town is built around a holy lake that attracts crowds of devout Hindus on the pilgrimage trail. The lake is surrounded by steps, to facilitate entering the holy waters. According to the *Puranas,* once when Brahma, the Creator deity, passed this way, he happened to drop a lotus. Of course, water sprang forth

from the dry desert in the spot where the petals fell. The Hindus are very serious about preserving the sanctity of this sacred place. They would be very offended if anyone tread on the *ghats*, steps, with shoes or took photos of their sacred ablutions.

The first trip down the bazaar street, I only notice shops with colorful wares and enticing silver jewelry. Next trip I look between the buildings to see many passageways down to the lake through the gateways of old family temples. Next trip, I glance up and note the latticed window where the women used to observe the life below them. Next day, I wander off the main bazaar street where I find many surprises of native architecture.

While I am strolling around, one problem does surface. It seems that foreigners here are known for buying *ganja,* marijuana, for all the shopkeepers call out to ask if I want to purchase some. A few days later, when I dress in my simple *sari* to go to the Brahma Temple, they all love it. I get several "Indira" calls here, as I did in the South. After a few days, everyone recognizes me and leaves me alone about the *ganja*.



Krishna Temple with guest house

I choose to stay in the Krishna Guest House because it is so fine and simple: every clean and very stark and very cheap at $1.00 per day. The main structure is actually an old temple, owned and operated by a very kind *Brahman* family. My room is part of the shelter where the pilgrims used to bed down for the night. The priest tells me that there are not as many pilgrims coming here these days. Nevertheless, they do keep the little Krishna deity alive with *mantras* and offerings.

Another thing I like is its restaurant, which is on a balcony, overlooking the main street. I love to sit there and sip tea as the crowd arrives at the near-by temple for their morning worship. I think it's a Vishnu temple—no foreigners allowed. As I watch, a group of middle-class women pass by in their colorful billowing nylon *saris,* offerings of flowers clutched in their hands. Then a troupe of dark-skinned pilgrims arrive, sporting their bright flower-printed skirts of red and orange. Draped over their heads and shoulders are bright green half-*saris,* only half concealing their personal trove of silver bracelets and necklaces, which are typical of the Rajastani peasants.



Rajasthani peasant women

Several entrepreneurs mix in with the pilgrims. A country musician is sawing the strings of his homemade lute in a monotonous strain. An orange-clad *sadhu* drifts past, nosily reminding the pilgrims that it is their duty to give to the renunciates. A jazzy tune wafts across the street from the loudspeaker of the music store. Looks like the *sadhu* scored, but it appears as if the businessman did not give up to expectation. The *sadhu* does not look pleased. A camel saunters by pulling a cart-load of motley-looking pilgrims; they must have been on the road for several days. Beeping cautiously and continually, a motor-scooter winds its way through the clusters of people.

The road does not fit the usual formula that I have found in the rest of India. In Pushkar distances are short, so 95% of the people walk, 1% have motor scooters, 1% bicycles, 1% jeep or car; no buses or trucks allowed, except on the outlying roads.

I spot a couple of men who sitting on the stone wall encircling a small Jain temple. I watch as money changes hands with a third party. Then he carries off stacks of dried cakes of cow dung, the common fuel in this area. A young European, a cigarette hanging from his lips, sports a garland of pink roses,

intended for the deities. Any number of cows plod past, one by one, through the crowd; they remain totally unfazed, for they have seen it all. Three young lute players, about twelve years of age, descend on the European, but it looks like they aren't having much luck. He does not reach into his pockets. The jazz from the loudspeaker seeems to drownsout the soft drone of the lute. Four young women pass, dressed in the brightest of green and hot pink, each carrying a baby about one year old.

A young prostitute, properly attired in the traditional Rajasthani dress—skirt with half-*sari*, tries to attract a young European male, but he turns away in a posture of rejection. She is non-pulsed; she has eyed another white male in my roof-top restaurant. As she swings her head with soft gentle motions, she suddenly pauses and spits into her cup—oops, cultural gap. The young man appears unmoved, as he continues to sip his morning tea.

The villagers of this area are a tall, dark, handsome group, particularly noted for their love of bright colors: a printed or decorated skirt and plain blouse with a half *sari* for the women and yards of bright cotton create turbans for the men. On the full moon of *Karik* (Oct.-Nov.) they have their famous camel fair. All the villagers from near and far come here to Pushkar to sell and trade their camels and cattle. Promoted heavily by the Rajasthan tourist office, the fair brings some 200,000 visitors annually. The majority are put up in tents, for the accomodations in Pushkar are limited. The entertainment includes such events as camel racing and folk dancing performances.



Rajanthani peasant with his beast of burden

I believe these original people could be the ancestors of the gypsies in Europe, at least those in Spain. Linguists there studied their native chants and found that the words were Sanskrit. They definitely have the same tall, lean look as these Rajasthanis. I am afraid life has always been tough for these desert dwellers, even today, so it's plausible that they would have choosen to migrate.

I love exploring new places, even the restaurants, for I the owners are often present to glean information about the area. This is the best place I have found for a variety of food, so in my reconnoitering I have

been able to find a new restaurant to try every day. My favorite is Kashmiri rice at the Rainbow, which has the best views too. The rice cooked with spices and mixed with candied fruit, raisins, with fresh apple and banana. All the shops and restaurants are centrally located, except my favorite tea stall, which is back by the bus stand.

Right under a spreading banyan tree with a bird feeder with dozens of ring-necked parrots, this tea stall is my favorite place to sit and drink tea. Watching the antics of India's largest and most colorfuls parrot keeps me entertained for several cups (tea cups are tiny here). They even hang upside down on a branch to make sure they get the next vacancy on the seed tray. To me, it is surely worth the ten minute walk. Then I discover the garden of the Sarovar Restaurant for breakfast, so that also makes it worth the trip. Since the service is so slow, I get to sit for an hour watching the varieties of small birds before I am served my porridge. I do not complain; I could sit here all day enjoying all the birds.

One day a rather dignified-looking *swami* shows up at the parrot-banyan tree tea stall. I pay for his tea, as I often do when a *swami* happens to be having tea when I am. Later in the day, I am walking down the main street and see him sitting on the curb, puffing on a *bedi* (local cigarette). For no reason at all, I take out a 10 *rupee* note and hand it to him. It will be enough to cover the cost of his food for a day. All of a sudden there is a great commotion around the corner. A cripple throws his crutches in the air and comes running toward me with great glee. Has there been a spontaneous healing? When I recover my senses, I realize that he only wanted a hand-out too.

In spite of the lake, Pushkar is predominately a desert reality, surrounded by immense sand dunes. I would say that it is an oasis at the desert's edge. Near the Brahma Temple, I find the spot to contract for camel rides. The proprietor tells me about the overnight excursions into the desert, which sound rather intriguing—specially the part about sleeping under the stars. However, since I have no companions for such a lengthy jaunt, I settle for the three-hour round of the nearby sand dunes.

Three hours turns out to be plenty. It may have been the awful heat radiating off the pink sand, or the unusual height, or simply the shifting motion of the saddle, but whatever it was, I had to put myself in "tolerate it, it can't last much longer" mode for the last hour of the journey. The two young Germans, who formed the remainder of my group, seemed to enjoy it thoroughly. At least they say so, their faces flaming red and dripping with sweat, as we sip sodas with fresh lime afterward. I wonder if there is any way to go on an overnight trip to the desert without the benefit of a camel.

One morning I pack up bread and butter with bananas and apples for both breakfast and lunch, then head for the desert. I had spotted a place where the giant pink sand dunes, a granite mountain of many colored stones, and blue sky—all meet at a small pond. I figure it must be a good bird-watching spot, so I also carry along a pound of bird seed. As I approach I reaffirm my intuition, for I see two female peacocks at the water's edge.

Immediately, a mongoose slithers through the taller grass on the other side of the pond to escape my intrusion. I sprinkle some seed on the bank, then wander off to explore the mountain. When I return I sit down to relax in the shade of a tree to eat my lunch. Afterwards, I just lie back and watch the many birds that the seed is attracting. Lots of quails and doves are around, but I spot about an additional dozen varieties. I acknowledge how good it feels to be warm and dry. Indeed, I feel very happy to be out of the rain—this sun is a nice change from that damp, dark room in Mt. Abu.

However, I have to recant on my assertion that "there is a holy man in every town." I suppose in deference to the *Brahman* priest/temple culture they have not settled here. Then too, the local population is too small to produce many donors. So my days are spent with more mundane investigations. I am continually fascinated by this world I living in. I am always talking to people, plus I have to time read here.

I find lots of reading material: newspapers and used books abound. When in India, definitely read the newspapers. After you pass up the political scandals, you will find it full of history, culture and social comment. There is practically no crime here, so the news has always centered around more mundane matters. I read a most compelling piece by Sanjay Ghose Bajju that is headlined: "No Time for

Childhood," in which he recounts the life in a small hamlet in Rajasthan.

Most of the villagers here are dependent on water from shallow wells that catch the rain. The village he wrote about was such a village, with the land surrounding the village considered common land, for animal forage, as well as shade and water. So to cultivate food and fodder, the village held land at another site where they migrated for an annual crop during the rainy season. Due to many years of drought, they had switched to farming at home, for they no longer had any animals that could destroy their crops. Because of the hard times, many of the villagers had given up and migrated into towns for minimal-skilled labor jobs.



Village women sell hay for cows in town

This season one family migrated to the old land holdings and spent two weeks digging out shrubby weeds with their bare hands, assisted by their young son. Then they planted winter wheat and left their *eleven-year-old daughter* behind to tend the crop, weed, water and even spray pesticides. The father would travel over occasionally to help her out and check on things.

The hamlet is so small that there is no medical aid at all. When a ten-year-old girl came down with a bad case of whooping cough, she had to be taken to a distant hospital. She refused to go without her mother. So her *seven-year-old brother* was left to watch the family crops as well as manage his usual chore: taking out 33 goats to graze daily. His mother would be away for a week, but he assured her that he could manage. *That's childhood in the Rajasthan hamlets.*

By chance, the government is putting in a canal for irrigation in their old deserted crop site. Technically, the land is owned by the villagers of the hamlet. However, the Government officials insist that they only have the right to farm it, not to sell it, for they do not have any deed. But somehow the Government has the right to sell it; even though they do not have a deed either. The irrigated land is going at 17,000 to 30,000 *rupees* per 6.32 hectare. One farmer was informed that the canal is going be available to irrigate over 40 hectares of his land. However, he has no resources to invest in the leveling required, the purchase of seeds, fertilizers, or any expertise in irrigation culture. The Government offered to trade him one irrigated plot of 6.32 hectares if he gave up his claim to the 40 hectares. He does now see how he can support a family of six with the produce of 6.32 hectares, so he declined. *That's exploitation in the Rajasthan hamlet s.*

If that news article does not convince you of the difficulty of life here in the desert, this story surely will.

One evening in my wanderings, I stop by to check out the Peacock Hotel. Since it's slightly off the beaten track, it has large grounds with a lovely garden and even a swimming pool. The owner happens to be in the shop, where I look at some Rajasthani mirror work at very reasonable prices. Findign him to be a very amiable person, I mention a story I read of the Rajasthani mirror embroiders, who were complaining about exploitation. The merchants can sell their work at even one hundred times the price they pay the seamstress who did the labor. The principal problem is there is no public transportation to their desert villages due to lack of roads. So the women have no way to sell their own handwork to shops in the cities.

One Rajasthani women who served as spokesperson for the group was rewarded a prize at a special handicraft show in Bombay. The villagers collected the money to pay her fare to the city. She had made the trip because she was to be gifted by the Prime Minister—at that time, Indira Gandhi. The simple, yet astute, village lady never lost her balance in the fanfare; she had an agenda. When handed the award, she personally invited Indira to visit her village. The Prime Minister said she would love to do so. In extracting this promise, the country woman knew she was also exacting a promise of a road. Indira certainly could not walk the 15 km. in the blazing sun as the villagers had to do to get to and from the nearest road. Alas, Indira was assassinated before the promise was fulfilled.

Pushkar is good to me, not one monsoon storm while I am out discovering the haunts of peacocks—and I do finally find several peacocks in the wild. You can see them here strutting on the grounds of the government hotel, but I find wild ones in a wooded area that looks as if it once was an estate garden. Peacocks are such a joy to watch as they shimmy and shake, then spread their tail feathers. Although we only get a light shower in the afternoons, they seem to know that it is monsoon time, for they are only active with their mating display during the rainy season. To top off my nature discoveries, I have also find lots of rose gardens, acres of pink cabbage roses, grown to adorn the temple deities, I'm sure.

I love my little room in the temple with its simple bright white walls. The only decorations are some recesses for oil lamps and a large stone archway that used to open to the temple, which is now boarded up. A long porch runs outside the entire length of the temple, edged with a variety of trees in the yard. After dark, I lie out on the verandah under the bright stars shining in a deep black sky. I watch the wind play in the trees that are backlit by the lights beyond the compound wall. Oh, how I love this world. It is such a wonder, such a mystery, such a delight. This must be the reason I am not committed enough to spiritual practices; I am such an enjoyer of the world.
I am enchanted as I see the smiling beautiful face of divinity peeping out at me from every nook and cranny.

In the seventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita,* Lord Krishna said, whenever you see anything bright and beautiful, know that it is I, for I am the inner most essence in everything:

> *For all creatures have their wombs in my highest nature....*
> *On me all the universe is strung, like pearls on a thread.*
> *I am the liquidity in the waters,*
> *I am the radiance in the moon and sun;*
> *The sacred syllable [Om] in all the Vedas;*
> *The sound in the air, the vitality in man.*
> *The pure fragrance in the earth,*
> *And I am the brilliance in the sun;*
> *The life in all beings,*
> *And the austerity in ascetics.*
> *Know me to be the primeval seed of all creatures,*
> *I am the intelligence of the intelligent,*
> *The splendor of the splendid, am I.*

I spend three peaceful weeks in Pushkar and could have stayed longer, but I have other commitments this fall. Also, I have a couple of places to explore before leaving Rajasthan, including a village in the mountains that one young man told me was India's Switzerland.

Chapter Forty-eight

India's Switzerland

I will have plenty of time to find India’s Switzerland since it is still morning when my train arrives in Beawar, the nearest large town. After inquiring the direction to the bus station, I set out on a short jaunt that turns out to be much longer than I had anticipated. The route takes me right through the middle of town, past the parade ground. I find it crowded with school children since it is India’s Independence Day. I pause at the back to see what is going on, but unfortunately I soon become the center of attention. I am thronged by male teenagers, and I do mean thronged. Fortunately, a policeman sees my plight and escorts me out of the mob. I hurry on my way.

When I arrive at the bus station, I cannot find the town “Koothada” listed on the roster, so I circle around back to look for an office. There I find a large room with doors wide open. A group of about six men seated around a small table are engrossed in a discussion that I sense is not urgent business, especially when they all turn to my direction when I enter the room. While I have their attention, I explain to them that I want to go to a small village, named “Koothada.” One man gets up to bring a chair so I can sit down at the table with the group. Uttering not one of the questions I usually get when I meet a stranger, they drop every concern and concentrate solely and completely on the task at hand: “Where is Koothada?” After some lengthy banter in Rajasthani, they all agree: “We do not know of such a village.”

I give them the little additional information I have: “I was told that it is near Bhim, but I can reach it by direct bus from Beawar, a journey of about 23 miles.” Still no note of recognition on their faces, so I continue with my last scrap of information: “Mr. Poonam Chand Singhwi Sajjan lives there.” This comment triggers another lengthy discussion; after which, they finally decide on the village that fits my data.

Unfortunately, I had written the name down incorrectly, creating somewhat of a stone in the rice, as we say here. The name of the village was Kookra or Kookda. These irregularities occur because of the transliteration into English. Since a workable system was never devised, all sorts of variations exist. A good example is that “Panjab” is incorrectly pronounced “Poon-jab” in English. Whoever translated it figured that the Hindi “pan” is pronounced like the word “pun” in English, so “pun-jab.” Then for no apparent reason, we turned the “pun” into “poon.” This is only one of many puzzles, especially when you hit the double consonants of the Indian languages.

The conclusion is that the bus I want will leave at 1:00 p.m. Suddenly, one of the gentlemen remembers that the driver of that particular bus should be in the station at this very moment. Someone runs to bring the driver. Since he doesn’t speak English, the others report to me, “Yes, we made the correct decision. Sri Singhwi lives in Kookra.”

Having successfully completed our business, I get up to leave. “Sit!” I am ordered with the usual hand signal for “wait.” They tell me tea is being brought. Well, this is a new twist, I smile to myself. Usually, tea is served before one is even allowed to state one’s business; here it appears when the concern had been completed successfully.

Soon I am on my way—over hill and dale—to Kookra. After a short walk down a dusty path, lined with white plastered houses, I reach the Singwi residence. He is now retired, living with his wife, a son and daughter-in-law. They greet me and invite me in, just as if they have been expecting me. I explain to

them that I had met their son in Mt. Abu. He had told me of his wonderful village. He insisted that I must see “India’s Switzerland” before leaving India.



Kookra—“India’s Switzerland”

“So I have come for a few hours, or a day, I really do not have a plan,” I assure them. I am carrying such a small suitcase that it will not look as if I am anticipating a long stay.

Although it’s already 2:00 p.m., they are just eating lunch when I arrive. When they insist that I join them, I dig in. Since I had only eaten my usual travel food of bananas and hard biscuits today, I have no trouble relishing the rice with spiced *dal.* Then I am told to “take rest.” I have learned that when in India do as the Indians do. If I do not “take rest,” it will throw the whole household off kilter, for they would feel obligated to stay up to entertain the guest.

Nevertheless, someone must have been carrying messages during the rest period. Immediately after the rest, I am told to “take bath,” for we are going to meet someone. I figure I have to meet the village head, or someone like that. After I bathe and change saris, the son escorts me down a path across a green field to another section of the town. I am surprised to note that he is carrying my suitcase with him, but I say nothing.

Soon we enter the gate of a white-washed high-walled home, apparently the nicest and biggest in the village. After crossing a large open patio, we go up a narrow staircase to the second floor. On the shady verandah, I see a striking woman, dressed in pure white cotton. She must have some spiritual status as several villagers are sitting on a rug spread in front of her. When I am introduced, I get the feeling she was expecting me. With her mediocre English, she welcomes me and asks me a few questions about myself. After some fifteen minutes, the son gets up to go and tells me goodbye.

That is how I find out that I am to stay here with the Jain *sadwis* (feminine form of *sadhu*). The one I just met is the mother; she has two young nuns traveling with her, who are her daughters. Their father also is a monk, but he always travels alone.

Sadwi Sheelprabha tells me that she and her husband had been living a normal householder’s life in Maharastra state when they met a Jain saint. He instructed them in the scriptures and meditation. Living a spiritual life appealed to them, so after some years of practicing meditation, they decided to retire from the worldly life and take the Jain vows. You cannot call them monastic vows because there is no monastery. Quite the contrary, they have to be traveling constantly, staying a maximum of three days

in one place—except during the rainy season. For those three months, they must choose one place and stay put. This is also practiced by Hindu sadhus,— for it is difficult to obtain food and pure drinking water during the monsoon. Kookra is the place these *sadwis*— chose this year.

In general, the villagers consider it a great honor to serve and feed the ascetics. Especially someone like Sheelprabha, for she is quite learned in the Jain scriptures and gives spiritual discourses every day. Naturally, I ask her if she knows of the unusual Jain saint I met in Hampi last year, I am surprised to learn that she does not.

It is really difficult to describe these three nuns, dressed in their simple unhemmed white cotton skirts and shawls. Sheelprabha is the most gracious, graceful person I have ever observed. I could call her the most beautiful, but the truth is that she is rather plain physically. I do not know if it is a spiritual radiance or what, but she definitely shines.



Jain Sadwis—Sheelprabhu and Daughters

And it is not from Ivory-clean skin. Jain ascetics cannot bathe, neither can they use any mechanical object. The justification is to avoid killing any living creature, even bacteria. They even carry little fluffy white mops to sweep off the spot where they will be sitting and they wear little white cotton masks to avoid inadvertently inhaling an insect, thereby condemning it to death. In lieu of bathing, they take a small handkerchief and dip it in cool water, then gently rub it over their own skin to refresh themselves.

Since razors and scissors fall into the category of mechanical objects, they are taboo. Therefore, maintaining the bald head of the ascetic is a little tricky. Every year they have a hair pulling ceremony. They do not pull out the hairs one by one, but in small hanks. The girls, still in their late teens, swear to me that their mother is an expert hair-puller, so there is minimum pain.
When the parents first took the vows, the three daughters went to live with their grandparents. The youngest one, about fifteen, still lives there. However, since the rainy season coincides with her school vacation, she is now with her mother and two sisters. She tells me that she is also considering joining her family. It is one thing to take to the ascetic life after one has married and had children and tasted life, but quite another when one is only a teenager like these young girls.

Although we get shady clouds daily in the afternoon, the monsoon is really light in these parts this year. Actually, it's an advantage for the nuns since one of them has to go out each day and collect their daily food from a designated home, as if she is begging. If it is raining, they cannot go out, even to collect food, so they do not eat that day. It is another one of those injunctions about bacteria on their skin having a rough time and drowning. To make things easy, I eat with a kind family across the complex.

I spend a lot of time with the *sadwis*. At first crack of dawn, we all head for the field with our mugs of water, just like the peasants all over India. No one in the city or country uses toilet paper; splashing one's genitals with cool water does work just as well. I hate to think of the condition of the landscape if the peasants used toilet paper.

After a light breakfast, we go out for a long walk. The *sadwis* are accustomed to walking from village to village, so they easily keep up with me. In every direction, the countryside is beautiful with green grass and foliage, interspersed with smooth gray boulders. One afternoon we hear some young men singing. As it turns out, they have all gathered to raise the walls of a home of a friend. They are all singing as they do the work together. I know that in northern Maine they still get together for barn raising, but do the sing?

After lunch and a rest, Sheelaprabhu gives a discourse, which I do not attend due to the language barrier. However, it is well attended by the villagers. In the evenings, I always join them when they sit out under the stars and sing *bhajans* in a tiny village square. This section of the village was definitely built for security. The houses are joined together to make a two-storied wall that serves as a fortress. There are two entrances and both have heavy wooden gates with heavy chains, which now remain thrown to the side. In addition, the maze of interior pathways has several gates that must have served to slow down any marauders. All the tiny courtyards are open to the sky. I always look forward to the informal get-together and singing under the stars. The group always manage to get one song out of me. I am a mediocre singer, but they do not know the difference. They always appreciate any attempt I make.

One day a young man, around twenty years old, shows up at our abode. When he arrived home from college, Prahalad heard the news that there is an American in the village and has come to investigate. His name tells me that he is a Hindu, probably a *Brahman*. Since I am about to set out on my daily walk, I invite him to come along. Because of the threatening clouds, the nuns are not able to join me today.

Although his family is from Udaipur, Prahalad is well informed about the local people. He shows me a weed that they squeeze to extract the juice, which is mixed with peanut oil to make a great hair oil; where as in the South, they use coconut oil. All Indians, male and female, oil their heads as protection from the sun. There is also a local strategy of putting a peeled onion under the hat to prevent sunstroke.

I was right about Prahalad's caste. His father is the doctor of the village. In the North, in addition to the normal duties of teachers and priests, commonly the *Brahmans* were the doctors. Actually, he is the doctor for over twenty small hamlets, for he is the only doctor in a thirty mile radius. When I go to meet him, back over on the same path where Mr. Singhwi lives, I find the wooden benches, which line the verandah of his office, are crowded with poor villagers. Dr. Vyas is a true saint. He could be living off the family business, a marble foundry, but he had always wanted to be a doctor. Instead of setting up an office in a city and raking in the rupees, he has a low-paying Government job here in the outback.

Just how outback? I am informed that the village elders have had a meeting since my arrival. They are sure that I am the first white face ever to enter this village. I am surprised, considering the fact that I was also informed that this was a prime area for growing opium during the Raj. I take it to mean that the British operated their enterprise only through native agents.

Not only does Dr. Vyas take care of the patients who come here, but two days a week he packs up his black bag and takes off on his motorcycle down dirt paths to visit the hamlets not accessible by automobile. The Vyas family lives in a simple home with one large room serving as bedroom and living room with a small kitchen off to the side. The only sign of luxury is a television; one of three in the village. Of course, Mrs. Vyas invites me for dinner, so we send word back over to my usual dining place. They are living the traditional life of the *Brahman*. Their type may be few and far between in today's

India, but they still do exist.

On Sunday afternoon while I am visiting them for tea, I suddenly hear the sounds of drums beating and bells ringing nearby.

“What is that?” I inquire. “Is there a festival?”

“Oh, no. The villagers must be having one of their ceremonies for healing snake bites,” Dr. Vyas informs me.

Do my ears ever pick up! “Healing snake bites!? Where?”

“At that little *mandir* [temple] down by the bus stand. Haven’t you noticed it?”

I had to admit I had not. “But can we go and watch the ceremony? Will they allow a white face?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not,” Dr. Vyas encourages me.

Prahalad is happy to accompany me, so we take off down the path, only a few hundred feet away. Although all the parties are present, the ceremony has not yet started. The fire pit is being prepared. The drummers and priests are gearing up. The father and mother of the victim are standing to the side holding their baby, who has been bitten on the bottom of her foot. Another spectator tells us that they had to take a two-hour bus ride to get here.

To the beat of the drums, one of the priests is working himself into a frenzy while another stands guard against the danger of a fall. Suddenly, the priest gives a wild shout and one leg jumps up and locks itself back behind his other knee, so that now he is hopping around the *mandir* with on only one foot. He circles it three times in a frenzy of swoons, swoops and pins. He then puts his mouth on the wound itself, sucks, pits, sucks, spits, then repeats it one more time. The female drummer is pounding hysterically while the fire bellows black smoke over the whole scene. Then, in a momen— it is all over. The priest puts his foot down and appears completely normal. Gently, he hands the baby back to the grateful parents.

Afterwards, we onlookers sort of mill about. As we pass the baby’s mother, I smile, but make no gesture toward them. From previous experiences, I do not want to frighten them. However, it appears they are not superstitious, for she lifts the baby toward me. So I respond and hold the little black-eyed doll for a few minutes. Miraculously, she seems to be totally calm after such an ordeal. *But could her passivity be due to the snake venom taking effect,* I fear. I am relieved that the mother was satisfied with my cuddling her baby and did not expect me to give it a blessing.

When we return to the house, I question Dr. Vyas, “Now won’t you give the baby some medical treatment, just to back up their witch-doctoring?”

“No, it’s not necessary,” replies Dr. Vyas. “What they do always works. It’s been working before I was here, and it will still be working after I am gone.”

It was easy to ascertain that these priests were not your standard *Brahmans,* but it turns out neither are these aboriginal practices from time immemorial. This ceremony was a gift of a Jat king of the 1700’s. The Jats, as well as Rajputs, are the *Ksatriya* caste in Rajasthan. Somehow this monarch had been bestowed this particular art of healing by invoking Lord Tejaji. He passed on the knowledge as a gift to humanity. As it turns out, there are some dozen of these small open-air *mandirs* scattered throughout Rajasthan.

The next day when I am wending my way across the fields via the earthen dikes, I happen to see the priest who went into the trance yesterday. Today he is a farmer hoeing corn with his family, like any ordinary laborer. When he sees me, he comes over to greet me and calls his two teenage daughters over also. After he introduces us in Hindi, he signals me that he wants me to bless them. Oh, dear, I am to

bless the daughters of a man who cures snake bites! Contradictions and inconsistencies. It does not compute, but neither do I want to show any disrespect. So I smile and place my hands on their heads in the traditional sign of a blessing. *See there, you survived it,* I tell myself. It really would be wonderful if I could truly bless these dear people.

In talking with the Vyas family, I discovered that there is a school in a third section of the village that I had not yet discovered. The next morning when I head in the general direction I find it easily. As I approach a rather large single-storied complex, I find a large room with an open door that looks like it may be the office. I stick my head in to ask directions. The moment I do I surmise that I have entered at the wrong moment.

“I see that you are busy. I can come back later,” I start to retreat.

“Oh, no. We were just finishing our discussion. Come in. Come in,” replies a dignified gentleman, definitely a Brahman. As I enter the room three or four village men, two of them quite elderly, rise to leave. The meeting seems to change its tone at my sight. The teenage boy who was the center of attention also gets up.

The gentleman who is officiating approaches the boy and looks him straight in the eyes, “The next time, we will call the police. You do understand that.” He is so short that he has to look up to face the boy, but he stands his ground. I am sure the boy knows he means business.

As the group exits, he turns to me, “How may I help you?”

“Are you the principal?”

“Yes, I am.”

I give my name and tell him just by happenstance I am visiting the village. Curious about the quality of the school, I just dropped by. “Frankly, I was expecting a one-room school for such a small village, but this is quite a complex.”

“Yes. We have children who come from all the hamlets around here. Some walk for five miles through the mountains to attend classes here.”

As we walk down the long shady verandah, he shows me various classes with lessons in progress. After the third classroom, I have to ask, “But there are hardly any girls in the classes. Only two or three in each class of twenty.”

“Yes, that is correct. You see the girls will be doing housework, so their mothers do not feel there is a need to educate them in the schools. They feel that they get their education at home. We probably would get a little better response if it weren’t for the long distance; however, in general, that is the attitude.”

As it turns out, the mountains are dotted with hamlets. One afternoon, I walk over the hill to the closest one. The first hut I encounter is that of the local leather worker. If I had not seen the cow skins, I would have noted the rank smell. His hut is on the outskirts, which is typical for his *untouchable* status. However, I am puzzled that he is located right on the path, which indicates I may be entering through the back door of the community. I wander down the lane that passes through a number of houses, scattered sparsely along the dirt path.

Then I see a stream in the distance that must be responsible for creating the expanse of green fields. From my position, the crops look like corn and wheat. I am standing on the side of a mountain that is solid granite, so not particularly easy to navigate. *Especially with clay pots of water perched on one’s head,* I think, as I watch the village women go by. The broken clay shards scattered about verify my conjecture.

Some children come to retrieve me to guide me to the home of a retired army officer. The gentleman is quite charming and seems quite comfortable talking and joking with the crowd of children who have

gathered in his yard. It appears he has a certain status, so I wonder if he was one of the gentlemen in the school conference the other day. He serves me milk, which was prepared, that is, boiled and sugared, by his niece. He has no wife or daughters, so his brother's family, in the cottage next door, provide him with meals.

He tells me that all the boys in these villages join the military as it is their *dharma,* duty, as *Ksatriyas*. Even though the *Ksatriya* caste consists of everyone from the king to the general to the foot soldier to the cook, the *Ksatriya* code is no small list of duties. Of course, they are fewer than the *Brahman's* allotment of duties, but still a formidable register of do's and do not's, should's and cannot's. The caste system may limit some, but it also protects the ones who have less. The poor villagers of lower castes never had to fight wars. The duty of the *Ksatriya* was to protect them, not to exploit the manpower of the poor. On the other hand, when I lived in Vermont, I never met a poor farmer who had not been drafted into the military.

There is a big difference in what is expected of the castes. Since *Brahmans* have the greater knowledge, they have more responsibilities, and are meted out heavier punishments. A good example of the difference according to caste appears in the *Mahahbharta*. When four men were brought to the king to mete out justice for the crime of murder, he inquired as to the caste of each one before sentencing them. They happened to be of the four castes. The lower caste *Shudra* (service) received four years' imprisonment because his intellectual understanding was not as developed. The *Vaisya* (merchant, landholder) received twice that sentence. The *Ksatriya*, whose duty is to protect the people, was sentenced to sixteen years in prison. Whereas the *Brahman,* the upholder of knowledge and truth in the society, received the death penalty.

To keep their skills honed, the *Ksatriyas* also like to hunt. In fact, during the past several centuries, it was their greatest passion when there was no war. However, *Ksatriyas* are not allowed to hunt now, Mr. Singh informs me. Recently, a tiger was taking some of the cattle in several nearby villages, but to shoot a tiger would have meant a heavy fine. The villagers had to contact the Forest Department, which sent out an Official to dispose of the marauder.

Because of the Rajput's passion for the hunt, Rajasthan contains some of India's greatest game preserves. The gem is the Keoladeo Ghana National Park at Bharatpur. The site was once a dip in the land, which only filled up during the monsoon season. To develop it, a Jat ruler diverted water from an irrigation canal, so that birds began to winter here—more migrants from Siberia. At peak migration, some four hundred species of birds can be sighted, with impressive numbers, like two thousand painted storks nesting in one square kilometer. During the Raj, twice a year, spring and fall, at least fifty British VIP's were invited for a big shoot. The goal was to bag one hundred birds each in one day, mostly ducks and geese.

However, for number of birds, instead of variety, you could not beat Gajner Lake near Bikaner, now an official wildlife sanctuary also. It was a favorite with the British viceroys; even the prince of Wales hunted there on his visit to India in 1905. In those days, some one hundred thousand sand grouse drank at the royal lake. Lord Mountbatten was able to bag fifty in one morning's shoot.

Undoubtedly, the tiger hunts were a favorite way to polish up the British dignitaries. The Ranthambhor National Park was also a hunting preserve of the *rajas*. The huge parcel has rivers that provide protection, food and water for a group of protected tigers, under the Tiger Project. Several people have told me that the tigers there are rather passive, so most people do see one on the jeep tours.

Kookra is truly so beautiful that I start imagining what it would be like to settle here in a little cottage. But what would I do? In less than a week, I am having some moments of feeling bored, and useless. Sometimes I feel it is apparent that I am just in India to rub out old battle scars from family, school, marriage. The peeling off the socialization and mental patterns seems to take place automatically and spontaneously in an environment that does not continue to enforce them. At home, my life was always a long list of things that I had to do. My theme was always, "Oh, I can do that." Here nearly every day, I am confronted with some reality in which I have to say, "There is nothing I can do." For example, the

ancient maps and books in the school, the girls who do not attend classes, the flies I see on a baby's face, the distances the women have to carry water, the inadequate gardening tools. There is simply nothing I can do.

My last morning in Kookra, I awaken to a quiet fresh green world. The birds sing, the trees shimmer, the corn grows, the breeze whispers. A perfect day for traveling. To my surprise, I receive an "official" sendoff. The elders of the village present me with a garland of paper flowers, then we take a group photo. I do not recognize any of them, but they knew of my presence (maybe from that meeting at the school). Afterwards, I pick up my bag and head for the bus. Tears are in my eyes as I board the bus. The young conductor refuses to take my fare, indicating my status as a guest in his territory. How can there be so many soft gentle people in this world? How have they managed to endure in a world where survival of the strongest with the biggest guns has been the perpetual game?

Chapter Forty-nine

Changing Times at Sevagram

From the train station at Wardha, I catch a bus that delivers me right at the gate of Mahatma Gandhi's Sevagram Ashram. Consciously and alertly, I enter the peaceful "place of service" through a pathway lined with tall lush shady trees. Pausing for a moment, I take in the scene: a half dozen thatched huts surround a large dirt yard, which is totally cleared of any grass or leaves—a snake prevention practice. Small white cottages, shaded by shrubs and trees, line the front row with their backs to the road. After a few minutes of silence, I am approached by a friendly young man, dressed in the white color of a *brahmachari*, who speaks mediocre English. First, he gives me a short tour of the key places, including Gandhi's hut, a tiny shop selling Gandhi's books, and the small dining hall attached to the kitchen. Then we walk across the yard where he shows me to a clean spacious guest room, which will be my living quarters for the next week.

In the early 1930's, after his famous salt march, Gandhi moved to the Wardha area through the graces of a wealthy landowner, Jamnalal Bajaj. At the time he had left the Ahmedabad *ashram* for that defiant act against the British Government's decree to tax even salt, Gandhi declared he would not return home to it until India had its Independence: He never returned. His European disciple Mirabehn had preceded him to this area to search for a suitable village in which they could do service to try out and develop Gandhi's social ideas. So in the mid-1930's, Gandhi's *ashram* was built here, along side a village of some 600 inhabitants, about half of whom were outcaste *Harijans*.

After lunch, the *brahmachari* introduces me to Jaswant Rai, who turns out to be my best guide to the world of Gandhi. He invites me into his small white cottage, right by the entrance gate. After his wife and I exchange some small talk, I mention that I am surprised that the *ashram* is so small and so empty.

"Oh, you must understand that the *ashram* was intended for training workers. It was never meant for living quarters. We are only here on a short vacation. We live and work in a village in the state of Madya Pradesh where we teach and train people in all kinds of practical skills.

"This was the case even when Gandhi was alive. Mirabehn did not live here, except when she was ill. She lived over in the Sevagram village and taught weaving over there."

"So you knew Mirabehn?"

"Oh, yes, we all knew her. She was such a dedicated hard worker. After Gandhi died she went up to Rishikesh and established a shelter for old and sick animals. When she became elderly, she left India to live in a country with a lot of mountains, I don't remember which one [Austria]. Anyway, she did write us from there several times, but we have not heard from her in many years now."

"You must have been quite young when you first met Gandhi."

Mr. Rai's face lights up with his memories, "Yes, there were a lot of us who were students at that time. We were very dedicated to his ideas of service to the backward villagers."

"The self-sufficient village economy?"

"Yes, it is not just an ideal; it is necessary in many of our isolated villages. You can visit the village next

door, you will see for yourself."

After I am all settled in the spacious guest room, I go to sit out on the verandah and wait until the sun moves a little lower to cast some long shadows before I set out to explore. Contented to just relax, I am brought out of my reverie when an attractive, chipper young woman about twenty years old approaches me.

"You are the American?" she inquires.

"Well, yes, I am an American."

"It is all your fault."

"My fault?" I am visibly taken aback. "What is my fault?"

"This terrible materialism that is ruining India; it is all the fault of America. Indians are crazy for American products. We were just discussing it in our seminar."

"I see, but I haven't seen a single American here telling Indians what to do or what to buy."

"Well, no, but the Indians are imitating them—what they see in the news."

Frankly, I am quite aware of this phenomena and have attempted to comprehend its roots. No doubt, the Empire was run on the fuel of superiority of the white/Christian race; a concept that was effectively backed by superior weapons. Where would the white Christians, with all our elite theories, be today without our barbaric guns and bombs? However, at the moment, I do not feel that anything would be gained by bringing the subject of the Indian inferiority complex into the current conversation. So I take a different tact.

"If the Indians want to imitate the Americans, why don't they pick some of their positive qualities?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"For example, the Americans are very hard working. They have worked hard to achieve their life-style. Also the majority are very honest. In U.S. you don't have to pay bribes to get electricity, to have your telephone connected, or to get a building permit."

The girl looks at me with a blank stare. It appears what I am saying is not sinking in. After a long pause, I politely change the subject. "You are here for a seminar?"

"Yes, the Gandhi Foundation offered a one-month seminar on his ideas. I am studying to be a journalist, so I felt that such a course would be worthwhile to me. But it has not really been what I expected."

"In what way?"

"You know the residents there in the village hate the ashramites," she explains.

"No, I wasn't aware of that. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because the *ashram* is fenced and private. The buildings here are so much better than what they have there."

"I don't get a feeling of the *ashram* being so private. The gate is open. I'm sure anyone would be welcome here—even to the daily prayer service."

"Oh, they come here all right. The boys—teenagers—come over here to use the public outhouses and smear shit all over them, so we have to clean them up."

"Yes, I would call that an hostile act. I wonder who cleans them when students are not here." Then I

chuckle.

She looks at me with a questioning glare, so I quickly explain. “I was thinking of a booklet that I just saw at the bookstore. It was written by a Japanese man, who visited here in the early 1940’s. Unfortunately, Gandhi was away when he arrived. However, he wrote to Gandhi, and received an immediate reply from him. That letter was published in the introduction of the booklet. Gandhi wrote that he supposed that the guest was having to empty all the latrine pails for the *ashram* residents because that’s what they always made the newcomers do. So here it is sixty years later, and there’s still no one to clean the toilets—except the visitors.”

That story does get a tiny smile out of the serious young face, but no conversation opens up, for she tells me she has to return to class. “Maybe you will come and talk to us one afternoon,” she remarks as she leaves.

“Sure, I’ll be glad to.” However, even though I walk through the area where the seminar is being held, almost daily, I never see her again. Nor am I invited to speak. Actually, the participants remained quite separate from the main section where I stay. I never saw any the teachers or students in this area.

Later, when I walk over to the village, I find that it probably looks about as it did when Gandhi was alive—with the exception of a large public school located on the entrance lane. I did not visit the school, for recent rains had made a huge pond in the road in front of it. I am not up to wading in mud when not absolutely necessary, but obviously the kids have to.

The Indians have always valued education. Educating the populace was one of the fundamental duties of the *Brahman* caste. In the 6th century BC, the university at Taxila had an international reputation as a center of advanced studies. From the 1st century BC, Indian scholars were invited to teach at academies and monasteries throughout Asia. In the 5th century AD, the universities of Nalanda and Valabhi supported the rise of Indian sciences, mathematics and astronomy. During this era, the original minds of the Indian scholars formulated the numerals we call “Arabic” and the concept of zero, which existed in their ancient texts. In the 10th century, when the Muslims arrived, nearly every village had its own school. If we compare this data with what was occurring in Great Britain in 1066 AD, I think we can get a glimpse of the waxing and waning of civilizations—and concepts of natural superiority.

In spite of the Muslim impact on the stability of the native Indian cultures, in the early 1800’s before the advent of the British domination, there were some 100,000 schools in India. The village schools were built with community effort; the teachers were furnished room and board by the villages. The students’ intense respect for their teachers is made apparent throughout the *Mahabharta* and other texts. There was no need for cash nor taxes. In the larger towns, the rulers usually supported the schools. The *raja* of Baroda had instated free and compulsory education to all his citizens in the 1920’s, long before it was practiced in Britain.

Then in the mid-1800’s, Lord Macaulay made it clear that mass education as practied in India was not to the benefit of the British. What the rulers needed was a class of clerks who would be interpreters between the government and the millions. They were to be “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” And they would forever remain as “clerks,” commonly referred to as niggers or peons by their overlords, who kept them out of any high positions in Government and the Military.

Thereafter, in the formal education throughout the Raj, all elements of anything pertaining to India—history, languages and culture—were annihilated. Its awesome texts of ethics and logic, its great literary epics, its world-renowned metal work, its extensive trade routes with China and the Roman empire—all were ignored. The textbooks were the ones used in England for English children—Christmas trees, St. Nicholas, English gardens and all. The repercussions were tenacious in destroying self-identity and self-value of the Indian people. Even today I find both Indians and Western scholars who comment that India had no written history. A completely assiduous idea that is a repercussion from the Western imposition of its education system.

However, the upper-caste *Brahmans* that the British chose for their education were not the ones Gandhi was targeting for his education program. He wanted a meaningful and useful education for the "dumb millions"—as he always called the peasants. He wanted to return to the cooperative system—in education, economics and politics—that had been traditional in the villages. Gandhi emphasized an education that would supply the real needs of the villagers, plus the use 0f Indian languages, as they were more authentic in expressing the Indian mindset and culture.

When Gandhi was ready to start a school at Sevagram, he was fortunate to have the educational model of Shantiniketam, a school operated by Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Prize winning poet [1913]. A married couple came from there to organize and run the school for Gandhi. They created a model for Basic Education all over the country. As the children progressed through seven grades, they would be learning different handicrafts and practical skills. While working with each particular handicraft, they would learn mathematics as the project required, the history of the craft, and understand each step of its development. Eventually, spinning would expand to weaving, and even growing and harvesting of the cotton. Gandhi envisioned that the various crafts would stimulate the children's intellectual curiosity, so they would want to discover, research and improve the various traditional methods.

The older children would make tools and equipment for handcrafts and agriculture, as well as learn the basics of construction of homes. Also they would be in charge of the production of food for personal and local use, experimenting and expanding the range of crops and fodder grown in their region.

Everyone agreed on the importance of art and music as a basic course. Art could be mastered in the use of decorating of the various crafts. Although the children would be from different religious backgrounds of Hindu, Muslim and Christian, moral and ethical values would not be neglected. The training would be based on universal ideals, specially the practice of non-violence. The keystone of the plan was a relationship of love and respect between the teacher and the student. I could easily envision the manifestation of this concept because I had recently read the work of Sukhomlinsky, a Russian educator. My head was in a peak experience state from the encounter with his descriptions of his teaching practices. [Some wonderful people have put his wonderful book: To Children I Give my Heart. It has been a tragedy of our generation that our history books have not included the incredible story of the heroic Russians in World War II and other wars for that matter.]

Financing the schools also called for some innovation. The traditional cooperative system was out of the question since the villages were now already overburdened with taxes to the central Government. Moreover, in British India revenue for education came from taxes on alcohol sales; it was a contradiction of Gandhi's values. He suggested that the children would create various handicrafts that could be sold to support the school. As for higher education, he proposed that the specialized training would be provided by the companies that required engineers, chemists, financiers, whereas Agricultural Colleges could be supported by their own produce.

One afternoon I have the privilege of speaking with Mr. Shankar Pandey, who had been the principal of the school here. Both he and Mr. Rai are perfect examples of the bright-eyed, soft-spoken, open-minded, dignified elderly Indian gentlemen. Certainly not a majority, but their type is abundant; I find them everywhere, in every caste, in every state. In their elder years, they seem to ripen into amateur philosophers. They are beautiful human beings. They make me think that every male should grow old in India. Perhaps, it has something to do with their developed feminine side. Certainly, the practice of the young to consult the elderly on major family decisions may influence both men and women to keep up their intellectual acuity and intuitive sharpness. The young do not need an injunction written in stone to respect the elderly; the elderly act in a manner that invites respect.

Mr. Pandey informs me that they had run the Basic Education school, founded here in the mid-1930's, until just ten years ago. He goes on to comment, "Then the Government built a school right in the village. The day it opened, our school emptied."

"The villagers preferred a Government school to Gandhi's plan, a plan geared specially for them?" I express surprise.

“You see, we taught according to each child’s needs. There were never any examinations or diplomas. This meant that our students were not accepted at the state universities. Whereas, since they are *Harijans,* or the lower caste, they have preference at the universities,” he comments.

“So the parents in this small village want their children to go to universities?”

“Oh, yes. They want the high-paying Government jobs. They will get preference for those too,” he explains.

“I’m afraid I know about that. When I was in Karnataka last year, the Government had hired a *Harijan* as a Priest in a government-run temple there, although he did not know even one verse from the Vedas, nor a word of Sanskrit. It’s not like there is a shortage of poor priests who need work in south India.” Without waiting for him to comment, I conclude, “So this means the local villagers rejected Gandhi’s concept of ‘cultured simplicity’?”

“That’s true. One problem always was that the parents did not like the children doing the manuring of the crops. We produced all of our food. We made all of our clothes, starting right with the growing of the cotton crop. We would use all the manure from the cattle and the latrines, so everything grew so abundantly.

“You can’t imagine what wonderful days we’ve spent here in the gardens. At harvest time, it was a huge green paradise. Then gathering time was a big festival. Everyone participated—from the first graders to the principal. We would all go out together and spend a whole day cutting and picking and singing,” his face lights up as he describes his memories.”

“Now it’s all over,” he concludes as he looks me straight in the eyes.

One afternoon I stop at the local tea and snack shop at the road junction in the opposite direction of the village. I call it a shop, instead of a stall, because it actually has tables, chairs and a roof. As I sit waiting for my tea, I realize, *I bet I have been in more tea stalls in India than any other person on the planet.* Now that is quite a distinction, but, of course, extremely necessary for my search for the best cup of tea!

As I look around while I am sipping the tea, I am surprised to notice that the proprietor, a young man about 35 years old, speaks English. Since it is so rare to find an English-speaker running a tea shop in a small village, my curiosity prompts me to strike up a conversation with him. My interest is further peaked when I find out that he is a product of Gandhi’s *ashram* school.

He quite willingly opens up and tells me that the ashramites took him in when he was about three years of age. He assumes he was an orphan; there were no records. Not only did they provide him with a home and education, but, when he graduated, they arranged a job for him in Singapore. We will assume it was menial labor; however, he was able to save some money. When he had enough to start a decent tea shop, he returned here to the only home he knows.

“There are some people from the village that criticize the *ashram,*” I mention.

“It’s hard for me to understand why they do, since I know the effort the ashramites put forth to assist those villagers for so many years. I can find no reason to criticize them. Everything I have I owe to them,” he assures me.

One the way back to the *ashram*, I notice a hospital named for Gandhi’s wife, Kasturbai. Later, I take the opportunity to ask Mr. Pandey about it. “I was surprised to notice that the hospital by the *ashram* is allopathic. Gandhi was a Nature Cure person. I don’t recall him ever condoning the Western allopathic medicine.”

“He didn’t condone it; he condemned it. He used to go over to the village every morning to treat the sick. He always used the simplest of home remedies: bicarbonate of soda, caster oil, enemas, mud packs and special diets.”

"So how is it that there is a allopathic hospital, named for Kasturbai Gandhi, here beside the *ashram*?"

"Because that is the way to collect foreign dollars. It did not start like that, but the original director has died. So the new directors took the easy way, they use the name to make it easy to get donations."

"And nobody cares that it teaches and practices the opposite of Gandhi's ideas?"

"Nobody."

Chapter Fifty

Gandhi's Economic Strategy

I am quite fortunate that Gandhi's daughter-in-law returns during my visit, for she lives here only part time. Mahatma Gandhi had four sons. The wife of his third son, Ramdas, is the only one who remains alive from that generation. In the afternoon, Mr. Rai takes me over and introduces us. A tiny woman, with gray hair rolled in a bun, Nirmala is antimated and smiling, truly a little ray of sunshine with no pretensions whatsoever. She does not speak English, however, but starts rolling out a story that sends her and Mr. Rai into peals of laughter.

"Just because she's eighty does not mean she doesn't remember things; she remembers too much," he turns to me and comments with a smile.

As they banter back and forth, it becomes apparent that she is speaking of the early days at the ashram. She too had been a student of Gandhi, wide-eyed and idealistic. But Gandhi insisted that all of his young followers remain unmarried, for their lives were to be dedicated to the upliftment of rural India. Although this attitude had some practicality, since the needs of one's own family could cause conflicts of interest for the worker, it has no sanction whatsoever in the Hindu tradition of the four stages of life. The ancient sages had spouses who were their indispensable helpmates. Even the Hindu gods have their feminine counterparts! Of course, Gandhi contributed his personal example— he certainly never gave his family any special consideration.

When Nirmala and Ramdas fell in love, Gandhi simply decreed "No," they were not to be married. The "Father of India's freedom" would not allow his own sons to choose their paths in life. They must have been confused observing their own father's sexual behavior. He did choose celibacy, but it was after having pumped out four sons and experiencing such a lusty nature that he was forever ashamed of it. It was no secret that he slept nude with young women (no sex—it was to test his celibacy) right up until the last years of his life. In addition, there were the two hour long baths when he was closed up in his private bath room with a teenage girl rubbing him down with polishing stones. Yet he expected his sons to eliminate women from their lives.

All of his sons defied him, chose a wife and got married. He stuck to his edict and he banished them from his life. None of them had it easy. Since Gandhi had refused them access to a standard education, they were ill prepared for a life in the world—they resented that too. The second son, Manilal, suffered the least repercussions because he was exiled to South Africa to manage the ashram there—as punishment for loaning his brother, Harilal, some money to help him out.

Harilal, the elder, was the real rebel of the family. He seemed to hold the most resentment for not having had a father; Gandhi was in England during Harilal's younger years. In any event, he led a difficult life and died young.

In Ramdas's case, using his father's numerous connections with India's wealthy industrialists, he was able to find a job. So he and Nirmala were able to live their own lives. Nirmala says that before Gandhi died there was some reconciliation between he and Ramdas. The youngest son, Devadas, also chose to live a life independent from his father. To pour salt on his own sons' wounds, Gandhi provided his favorite nephew with a London education, allowed him to marry, and called him "closer than a son." His biographer, Louis Fischer, sympathetically opined that he simply must not have wanted to have children.

Then my conversation with Nirmala and Mr. Rai turns to the subject of the other students at that time. I am informed that they had also married, but they were allowed to carry on the social programs anyway. “So you actually lived on the job. You raised your families in those isolated villages?” I question Mr. Rai.

“Oh, yes. Our children lived right with us. We all lived in the same huts and ate the same food as the villagers. Our children participated in whatever way they could.”

“Where are all the workers’ children today? They must be adults now?” I question him further.

“Oh, they are all in America.”

“In America?”

“Yes, they are only interested in making money and having a comfortable life. They want to make up for all the deprivation they suffered as children. All of them figure that they have had enough of India and its poverty.”

“Well, I somehow find that surprising.”

“There is one exception, the daughter of Devendra Kumar. She is the only one of all our children who has remained a dedicated worker. She works with her father at the village research center near here. You must go to meet them.”

We all fell silent, as if in prayer. Is it a prayer for the demise of Gandhi’s dreams, or is it a prayer for the plight of human kind? I cannot say.

“Caw. Caw.” The call of a nearby crow pierces our pensive mood.

“Let’s have a cup of tea. It must be ready now,” Nirmala pipes up.

Our silence touches a place in our hearts where humans fear to tread. The laughter about the “good ole days” was over for the moment.

That evening after the meditation service, I set out for a leisurely stroll through the grounds, comparatively small for the number of people who once lived here. I think of Gandhi on three fronts, his personal life, his ideas on education and economy, and his involvement in politics. Gandhi named his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth.* His truth were his experiments with *swaraj*, self-mastery, and *satyagraha,* moral force, and have universal application. Gandhi’s experiments in his personal life with women, diet, family were his personal affairs and little can be gained from them. The truth of the world is constantly in a flux due to changing situations and circumstances, so it’s hard to judge another from another time, place and culture. I think we have to admire him for his conscious attempt, even though we may not agree with some of his actions. His treatment of his wife and sons was not befitting a saint, and cannot be rationalized in light of any cultural or moral system—certainly not Hinduism. While traveling through rural India, I am always observing villages that have not changed in centuries. I have said to myself at least one hundred times, *What would India be like today if it had followed Gandhi’s economic plan: the small, independent village unit as the base of the economy?* The village economy was most important to Gandhi. Both Mr. Rai and Mr. Panday have described to me how he spent a lot of his personal time in the little nearby village when he was able to spend several years at a time in this ashram.

Gandhi knew that the foundation of India’s independence had to be a decent economy. How could a country drained of its natural resources and held back in industrialization become a viable entity?

When I mention that I have lived in India to anyone in the U.S., the response is always the same: “How could you stand the poverty?” Everyone knows of India’s poverty, yet to this day I have never found one American who has bothered to investigate why India is in such poverty. It would not take a lot of thought

to figure there is some glitch on the historical road map. America was “discovered” because Europeans were seeking trade with India. At that time, India represented the ultimate in wealth in spices and gold. When the first Europeans traders, led by the Portuguese Vasco de Gama, reached India in 1497, they found an international community of Jewish, Armenian, Arabian Moslems traders, all peacefully living under a Hindu king in an area call Malabar. What was the need for greed, when there was enough for everyone?

So from 1492 to the present date, what has happened to render India the epitome of “poverty”? Of course, I am more than happy to enlighten anyone on the subject, but I still wonder why people do not think for themselves. Of course, the question about India’s poverty is always followed by the wise remark: “If they are so hungry, why don’t they eat their sacred cows?” Again, how much thought does it take to calculate that if you have a cow it will provide milk, butter and yogurt to a family for some ten years. That's the female cows, the male cows are used for plowing the fields. Anyway, if you kill a cow to eat it, how long will it last—and in a tropical country? Truly, my concern is the poverty of the American intelligence. I wonder how long people are going to continue to settle for an education that systematically extracts their power to think for themselves?

With the different stories I am hearing, I am just plain puzzled: Who is this man Gandhi? I am impelled to figure out what he was all about. Was he in fact just a convenient hero for the uneducated peasants and idealistic students? Even today the Indian peasants’ need for heroes—or kings—or movie stars is overwhelming. I know the phenomenon exists elsewhere, but not to the degree it does here.

So I take advantage of the time while I am in Sevagram to immerse myself in the various booklets and pamphlets available here on Gandhi’s ideas. In reading some of the literature, I find that Gandhi’s economic ideas were not original. He had arrived in London in the late 1890’s at a time called the New Age. The proponents emphasized a philosophy of self-reliance both economically and physically, through Nature Cure (natural medicine) and vegetarianism. However, their principal objective was a life of non-violence. Gandhi was particularly influenced by Ruskin, Carpenter, Thoreau and Tolstoy. Gandhi even corresponded with Tolstoy, who in turn had been influenced by Rousseau. Now I have a new list of authors to read, although I had recently read Rousseau’s biography. That’s the advantage of my being a self-taught person—learning never ends.

The European New Agers were very interested in Gandhi’s work. Although they had established their back-to-earth communities in England and Switzerland, the settlements were very small. India seemed to hold the only hope for a true New Age. The lack of industrialization could be an advantage; for, in the West, the movement had to remove a lot of unwanted elements that still did not exist in India. Several of the New Agers lived with Gandhi at his Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, while many visited his ashrams in both South Africa and India. However, they did not feel his definition of non-violent was the same as theirs. They particularly found fault with his recruitment of soldiers for the British in World War I and his defiant act of the burning of European clothes, so they parted ways. However, Gandhi had learned the foundation of his social ideology from them.

Gandhi was proposing a complete social system based on a self-sufficient village unit. He felt that economy had to be a means to an end: the true goal of life being the spiritual evolution and freedom of the individuals. A sound economy that provided for everyone “according to their needs” was essential for the progress of mankind. Gandhi would point out that while it is true a hungry man cannot pray, neither can one who has stuffed himself.

The British had changed the agricultural focus throughout their empire. Instead of the basic growing food crops for use in the home and for farm animals, the villagers had to grow commercial crops, dependent on an outside market, to raise cash for taxes. This change was a key factor in the demise of the traditional culture and economy. Gandhi insisted the villager grow enough food to feed everyone a healthy diet, as well as sufficient cotton for clothing. Thread was to be spun in the homes, then woven in cooperatives.

When the Europeans arrived, every village—and many individual cottages—had their own spinning

wheels. The oldest piece of cotton cloth extant on the planet was found in the Indu Valley ruins, dated before 3,000 BC. These cottage industries were ruined with the importation of foreign cloth. The destruction of their wonderful native textiles was well calculated. One caste of weavers produced the finest of silks. I have seen some one-hundred-year old silk saris with beautiful intricate designs. Since the British could not compete with their work, they cut the weavers' fingers off to prevent the competition. I surmise that it must have been their fingernails that were snipped off because one can picture that they could be using long fingernails for fine weaving. However, I have heard this story a half-dozen times and the Indians do believe that the tips of their fingers were chopped off. Even if it was not true, the common belief that their native artisans were treated in such a manner is in itself significant.

Gandhi planned homes constructed with community effort from available native materials—not really a big change in most villages even today. Direct exchange of goods, services and facilities between villages would eliminate the middlemen who necessitated the use of money in trade. Any excess produce would be traded for goods with a network of surrounding villages and used for the paying of the inevitable taxes. His intent was to distribute the wealth equitably. The principle was that if no one owned anything, there would be no obsession to overwork for the sake of accumulating.

Many of his ideas were not new to India. The communal use of land and goods, with distribution of labor according to skill, talent and caste was their traditional system. Karl Marx used the ancient Indian communities as a model in his Das Capital [published 1867]. I have not been able to verify it, but he may have visited Indian villages. Among the specialists he cataloged, such as the headman, judge, priest, astrologer, potter, he included an oddity that I only have heard of here: the person who was assigned to protect any travelers through the village and to escort them to the next village. In spite of foreign incursions, things change very slowly in rural India. Some of these villages still existed early in this century, but were doomed to demise as the British extended their revenue network. Inevitably the villagers were forced to produce the crops that could be sold for cash money to pay taxes.

I have often noticed that the 1850's were crucial in Indian, therefore, world history. In 1857, while the British were busy bringing civilization to the dark heathens by hanging entire populations of villages on trees to rot and by blowing away "mutinous" soldiers strapped to cannons, Karl Marx was studying the traditions of these very villages. At the time, when Lord Macaulay was making his ultimatum to destroy the traditional Indian education system, Thoreau, Emerson and Tolstoy were enthralled by the wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Again Gandhi's economic plan was practical. The third world countries that had been kept down economically by the Empire powers were far behind in the world arena. If rural Indians were going to have a decent life, the village economy was the only solution that seemed feasible. Firsthand lessons had clearly demonstrated to Gandhi why the capitalists' system simply would not work in India. The laborers were too easily exploited.

When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, after 20 years in South Africa, he was aware of the economic system and its ramifications, for it was exactly like the one he had been fighting there. I find it interesting that within two years in India, he found three specific causes to assist the exploited laborers.

First was the indigo crisis: Germany had invented synthetic dyes. Suddenly, the peasants who had been required to grow indigo on 3/20th of their leased property had a useless commodity on their hands—but they did not know it. To take advantage of the situation and make up for their own losses, the deceitful European landlords tried to collect illegal fees to "release" the grwoers from their indigo obligations. Even before then, the British landholders in Bihar had a reputation for extracting illegal dues from the peasants. I am sorry to report that the phenomenon continues today in the area even though the British have left.

A Bihari peasant who knew of Gandhi's work in South Africa dogged him until he got Gandhi to come look at the situation for himself. Gandhi remained in Bihar for six months, painstakingly noting all the complaints of the laborers one by one. An episode from this conflict appeared in the movie, *Gandhi.* In spite of harassment and even imprisonment, Gandhi stayed at the task until he won British government

cooperation for the laborer's cause. His victory for the indigo planters in Bihar was crucial in elevating the attitude of the peasants; Gandhi became their savior.

The second incident was in Gandhi's home state of Gujurat. There the peasants protested that, although 25 percent of their harvest was lost to drought, their unreasonably high taxes to the Government were not renegotiated. In the past days of the kings, they would have had to pay only a percentage of their crop for taxes; so when the yield was low, the tax was adjusted automatically. Under pressure led by Gandhi, the taxex were finally reduced.

However, his most interesting campaign was against an Indian, specifically, a wealthy mill owner in Gujurat. So in his home state, Gandhi directed a successful strike among the laborers, who lived the equivalent of Dickens' London, or U.S's Pittsburgh. He used these protests as a forum for the development of his ideas, gradually fine-tuning his technique of *satyagraha*, that is, moral force obtained by adherence to the truth. Not only the truth of the issue for oneself, but for the opponent too, who was never considered an enemy. If we reform ourselves, the rulers will automatically follow suit was his theme. In the end, although Gandhi was the savior to the "dumb millions," it is clear that he did not reach the mind of the peasants. They live from day to day with little or no interest in improving their lot. They are satisfied when someone does a project for them, but they continually show little interest in initiating improvements for themselves. The example here at Sevagram is typical. Even after fifty years of assistance, which was oriented toward teaching and training them, somehow the villagers never learned to do anything to improve their own lot. It is certain that Gandhi and his followers even had to educate the peasants to understand that the British Raj was responsible for their local grievances and exploitation. They were capable of comprehending this political reality, but his ideological concepts of *swaraj* and *satyagraha* were beyond their capacity.

In my opinion, the fact that he had a following of millions of peasants created interest in Gandhi in the rest of the world. This fame gave him leverage for his political success, which came from a more sophisticated audience—Americans and Europeans. President Roosevelt personally put pressure on the British in favor of India's independence. From the time of his Salt March in 1930, his actions were international news. Dozens of foreign reporters were at the sea when Gandhi picked up those few grains of salt. That year, he was named "Man of the Year" by Life Magazine. Right through the second world war, Gandhi captivated the war-worn nations with his method of politics. In a world that needed heroes, Gandhi fit the mandate.

Chapter Fifty-one

A Second Look at Non-Violence

Last year I had met a south Indian *Brahman* whose family had been enthusiastic followers of Gandhi's ideas. Even today he only wears the traditional handspun and woven cotton, called "khadi." One day in our conversation, he had lamented that Mahatma Gandhi had been a failure. At that time I had very little information on Gandhi, so I was rather taken aback.

For the next few days, my mind kept chewing the facts, trying to make some sense of his allegation. A couple of days later when I saw him, I comment, "You know I've really been thinking about our last conversation about Gandhi. It was surprising for me to find out that some Indians consider Gandhi a failure."

"No, not Indians. Gandhi himself said he was a failure."

"I see." I pause to let the facts circulate through my brain. Actually, although we consider him the prophet of non-violence, Gandhi was ambivalent about violence.

"I do see that in the midst of all the violence at the partition of Pakistan and India, that it would have been difficult to not face his failure. If his mission was non-violence, and not the independence of India per se, then he was a failure. Although no British were killed, at least, one million Indians died. So that's not exactly a non-violent result; not to one who had once declared, 'I will not purchase my country's freedom at the cost of non-violence.'"

"Yes, the dichotomy in Gandhi's attitude surfaced during World War I when he recruited solders of the British army in Mesopotamia. He never seemed to have a simple, straight-forward plan. He kept experimenting to find out what would work."

"I knew that he supported the British in the war, but I never knew he recruited soldiers."

"He felt that the British military was protecting India and Indians, so they should be supported. But he did not get much cooperation from the Indians. You see he had just led a non-violence strike, and afterwards was asking the same people to fight in a war. They laughed at him."

"Sometimes the Indian peasants are not as gullible as one would think. So he had no luck recruiting soldiers?"

"None at all. As a matter of fact, he became so frustrated that he pushed himself until he fell seriously ill. In addition, he had another reason for supporting the war. At that time, he thought there was a chance for Dominion status for India. Therefore, the Indians should know military tactics. The battlefield of the European war would be a training ground for them. His idea was that only the brave and courageous could practice true non-violence."

"I seem to remember that he said that a cat and a mouse could not form an alliance, implying that Indians were the mice."

"Yes, you see the depth of his understanding of the situation in that simple statement."

“Then after the war came the Rowlatt Laws,” I led him back to his train of thought.

“Well, those laws to imprison anyone the government wanted to without trial had actually been practiced during the war, supposedly to punish, or deter, dissenters to the war effort. When the Government decided to make the practice a law after the war, of course, the Indians objected—and loudly. This was the first time the whole country was openly united against the British.

“But after a mob burned a police station, killing the officers inside, Gandhi called off the whole nationalist movement. Because of his pronouncement, the movement lost its momentum.”

I commenedt, “One freedom fighter told me that had Gandhi let the Indians continue with their independence movement at that time, India would have gotten its independence in the 1930’s—with much less loss of lives. At that time, the Indians were directing their violence appropriately against the British. So it some years later when the Indians turned their ire and frustration against each other.”

He picks up the idea, “It is true that the delay gave the British time to regroup, to divide the Muslims and Hindus further. That momentum was never recaptured. And it all ended in violence anyway. But Indian against Indian—instead of against the British where it was appropriate.”

“It does seem that Gandhi stopped the momentum at a crucial time. He was so determined that there should be no violence. He intended that the Indians had to train and discipline themselves. I understand that on his Salt March, all the participants had to train with him at the ashram for a year. I was surprised when I read that not a single member of Indian Congress was among them.

“Of course, there were practical considerations. Certainly, history informed Gandhi of the violence the British were capable of. The British had the rifles and cannons.”

He paused to consider my comments, “You’re right. Even if he did not know the right thing to do, he knew that in dealing with the British, we had to use non-violence.”

I continue, “You know it surprises me that he waited so long to face the fact of the violent nature of the British, that is, the European gene pool. In his personal history, four times he had been physically manhandled by the British, in one instance by a mob. I never understood why that did not wake him up to the fact the British in South Africa and India were not the gentlemen he supposed them to be—the gentlemen he needed them to be if he was going to be successful in his political maneuvers.”

But a failure? I take a long pause to let that one sink in. India did get its independence. But that was not his goal, his goal was independence in the corred “non-violent” way.

In short, it appears his authoritarian disposition was not entirely reserved for his private affairs. After discussions with Gandhi, Dr. Edward Thompson of Oxford University described Gandhi succinctly, “Like Socrates, he has a ‘daemon.’ When the ‘daemon’ has spoken, he is as unmoved by argument as by danger.”

Being the hero of the masses also gave Gandhi the leverage to become a dictator within the Indian Congress. When he called off the non-violent movement in 1930, he did not consult with anyone. He cut down every logical argument of his comrades—who were powerless because they were all in prison. Although he refused to become an officer in the organization himself, he single-handedly manipulated the Indian Congress. For example, when the assembly elected Subhas Bose as their president, Gandhi made a power play and forced his resignation. Bose was definitely following a more aggressive course for Independence.

It’s hard to know why Gandhi chose to continue in politics to the detriment of his social work. Tolstoy personally warned him against the nation state. Tolstoy was outrageous, even in today’s terms, in his criticism of the “State.” He saw patriotism to a nation state as the root of war, violence and exploitation. He warned Gandhi that the very nation he was struggling for would be responsible for deluding the populace to give up their older traditions of allegiance to land, customs, culture—in exchange for the

protection of the state, an amorphous entity that would send them off to war to be slaughtered.

He put it rather harshly, “Patriotism in its simplest, clearest, and most indubitable signification is nothing else but a means of obtaining for the rulers their ambitions and covetous desires, while giving the ruled the abdication of human dignity, reason, and conscience, and a slavish enthrallment to those in power. . . . Patriotism is slavery.” And how did we allow ourselves to be slaves of the State? He had some poignant ideas on that too. “The church is but a backer of the war-monger State. It is the fraud of the church, taught us early in our lives, that sets us up to accept the political frauds.” Sounds like he read Voltaire also!

Gandhi and Tolstoy corresponded for several years right before the Russian’s death. But Gandhi was a Hindu—to the core. He could not give up the mentality that some men are born to be warriors. This is the testimony, although not necessarily the moral, of the great war portrayed in the *Mahabharta*. This concept, that we are all born with a temperament toward certain duties, is the crux of the caste system. Some persons have a propensity for fighting. Put these people in a war and let them get it out of their system. Remember, the *Kama Sutra*, which was written by a great sage, conveyed the same message. Some people have a strong desires for sex, so all the information they need is herein provided. Whether sex or fighting, there are just some experiences that certain individuals are born to go through. . . let the world give them what they need to finish off the desires, then their minds and bodies will be free from more spiritual endeavors. The ancient *rshis* were not upholders of repression.

Along with Tolstoy, Rabindranath Tagore, who Gandhi considered a spiritual *Guru* at one time, was vehemently opposed to nationalism. In a lecture tour in 1916, he alerted Americans, “Not merely we subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are every day sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic.”

“Political freedom will not make us free,” he warned Gandhi again and again. Tagore felt that the political issues had diverted attention away from the country’s primary needs. He deprecated the trend toward nationalism because it pursued political goals rather than social ones. Of course, Gandhi agreed on the importance of social improvements, but he was adamant about his political goal. However, the two were totally in accord with the concept that those who failed to attain *swaraj* in themselves could never find it in the outside world.

When I spoke again with Shankar Panday, I mentioned, “When I stood in Gandhi’s hut, I definitely got a glimpse of ‘cultured simplicity.’ The simple mud walls with decorations of the palms and Om symbol that were molded into the walls by Mirabehn. Yet, I can hardly fathom how far this life-style was from the one Nehru and his comrades established in the ex-British mansions of New Delhi.”

“Believe me everyone here was utterly shocked when Nehru moved into the Viceroy’s mansion.”

“Did Gandhi say anything?”

“No, no one said a word. No one had to. It was in complete opposition to Gandhi’s ideals.”

That was not the only thing that was in opposition to Gandhi’s ideas. He had to go on a fast to force the new Indian government to pay Pakistan the cash from the national coffers that was due that country. Also Gandhi criticized the Government for putting the military expenditures at the top of their budget. Again Gandhi wanted legitimate parties formed so that India would not have a one party rule. The truth is Nehru not only ignored Gandhi, he ignored his own Congress Party. Within the first year, the Congress President resigned in protest to the corruption, bribery and profiteering he witnessed in the Government. Ignoring Gandhi’s suggestion to install a strong leader, Nehru found a quiet “yes” man to replace him. Gandhi then planned to take the only avenue he felt open to him: a massive campaign to educate India’s voters. But he was assassinated two months later, so his plan was terminated before it got off the ground.

So we can conclude that Gandhi may have had an impact on the world, but not on his own Government,

even though its leader claimed to be a Gandhi disciple. The truth speedily emerged that the men who had spent half their adult life in British prisons were not prepared to live a simple life of self-effacement. In addition, the Indian Congress had been financed by wealthy industrialists, so there was an implied debt of gratitude.

More and more, I am coming to realize that Gandhi was the one and only meeting place between the Indian Congress and the masses. Gandhi had gained the confidence of the laboring masses through his three successful protests. His genius was apparent when he chose the issues of his campaign, for the peasants could comprehend spinning and salt. Gandhi wrote Tagore that he had contemplated for days before he came up with idea of salt, the perfect item for his boycott. In the ancient village economy, every hamlet produced everything it needed, except salt. Salt had to be imported. So over thirty years previously when the British had imposed a salt monopoly along with a tax, it touched every peasant. The sophisticated Congress businessmen, even Nehru, thought salt was a joke. None of them even pretended to participate in Gandhi's spinning plan.

The Indian Congress had been created by native Indian industrialists for the purpose of improving their own prospects. Looking back, all of them were entrepreneurs, out for their own good. If you think that their "good" suggests the good of the workers, I refer you to Margaret Burke-White's *Halfway to Freedom* in which she describes in detail the condition of the workers at the Birla factory in Delhi when she visited Gandhi in 1946. Birla, the wealthiest native industrialist, had stated that the only recourse for India's entrepreneurs was "strengthening the hands of those who are fighting for the freedom of the country."

And Gandhi had a certain propensity for the "good life" himself. He had grown up in a middle-class environment. Although he was of the "grocer" caste, his father had been a minister in the local royal court, a duty traditionally relegated to *Brahmans*. During all of his civil disobedience campaigns, During resided in the homes of the wealthy landowners and a mill owner, not with the laborers. When in Delhi, he lived in the home estate of Birla. Birla's repute was such that an expose on the machinations of the Indian industrialists, *The Mysteries of the House of Birla,* was named for him. Margaret Burke-White pleaded with Gandhi to go see how Birla's laborers lived, but he refused. Birla personally financed Gandhi's Sevagram ashram for years. Gandhi was staying in his personal quarters at the Birla mansion when he was assassinated. Mr. Panday's voice interrupts my thoughts, "The Raj of the British Empire was for the sole purpose of milking and bilking the people. A native Government for the sake of the people had to change completely its ideals, structure, and methods. But it remained the same. The faces were now brown instead of white, that was the only change. Gandhi had spent years working out a plan for a self-sufficient economic and political system, one that would require much less government. The ideas were there ready to implement.

"A plan that outlined the new indigenous Government had been drafted twenty-five years before. It stressed a maximum of local autonomy and a minimum of control by state and central governments. The traditional village *panchayat* (council of five) system, which everyone was familiar with from the remotest village to the executive suites of Delhi, would be the natural foundation of Government."

"But the Europeans used the rationalization of superiority due to Christianity, white skin, and intellect to exploit 'the heathens,' what excuse do these Indians have?" I question him, trying to keep calm. I hate it when my voice gets heated because the Indians are always so cool-tempered.

"I cannot tell you. It is a mystery to me. One of our own people was appointed as Education Minister, but he could not implement a single change. Nehru just ignored him. The public schools retained the old British curricula. The closing of our school here because a Government school was built along side it is common; even though many areas are without any schools at all."

So drained of its natural resources, its traditional crafts and guilds destroyed, its native education system annihilated—India set out to form a nation with leaders who were intent on making up for their personal losses. I am afraid that's the story of democratic India. I have to wonder if one of these days the Bharatis will realize who they are and turn back to their traditional roots. The foreign British vacated India fifty

years ago, but they had stayed too long.

They left behind a nation of imitators.

Chapter Fifty-two

A Unique Type of Trip

My next adventure is back in Andhra Pradesh, after a respite in Bombay and Pondicherry. My first encounter with Jeevashram seemed to be a coincidence, but the Hindus say there are no accidents. Once while I was visiting Usha, I happened to glance at a newspaper laying on the dining table. Usha occasionally buys a newspaper, but I rarely have time to look at it when I am in Pondy since I am preoccupied with researching and editing. However, the page happened to be opened to an unusual ad that caught my eye. There was to be a one week spiritual retreat in Madras, at a low cost of only 100 Rps. ($5). But the intriguing part was a blurb that promised a trip to *Satya Loka*. As we know, there are seven heavens, for we have the expression in English, "the seventh heaven." In this "realm *(loka)* of truth *(satya)*," one receives the highest esoteric teachings—we did not know that.

I become quite intrigued: "Usha, did you see this ad? They promise a trip to *Satya Loka*. . . Well, it's not enlightenment, but it may be next best thing while someone is hanging around waiting."

Usha comes over to check out the ad. "It does sound interesting doesn't it?" she has to admit.

Then as she reads the ad closely and notes the address, she exclaims, "Nancy, you're not going to believe this, but I think these are people from the school in Andhra where I taught for two years. You know, the one where the director was an interesting *guru*-type. He was purchasing land to start a spiritual community, which he intended to support with the income from the school. Even then they were making plans to have meditation retreats."

"Did you ever go to *Satya Loka* while you were there?" I immediately query her.

"Oh, no. They never discussed their plans with me. I just caught bits and pieces."

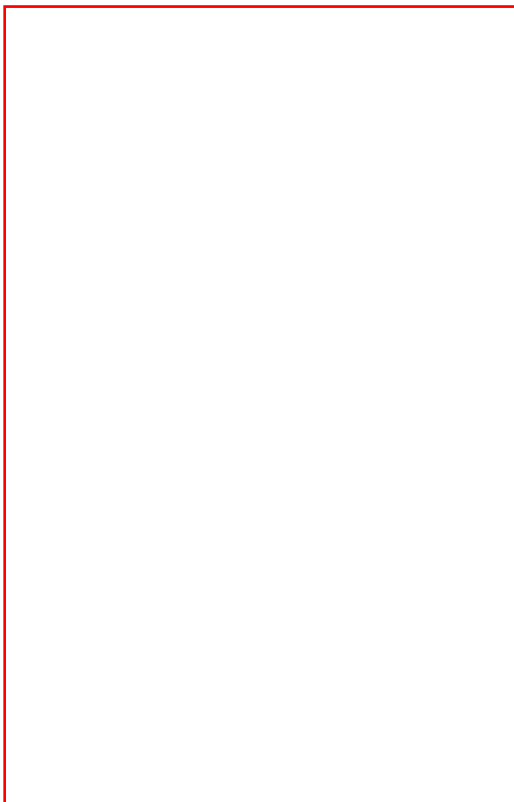
So following the directions on the map, which I received with my registration, I find my way to a gate labeled "God's Garden" in a tiny village near Madras. I sign in for the retreat on the shady verandah of a small white cottage. Krishna, a teen-ager with a wide friendly smile, grabs my suitcase to carry to the women's quarters. There I find myself inside a large thatched hut with a high-pitched ceiling of beautifully woven palm leaves. In this shady, airy space, I will eat and sleep—in silence—for the next week. Krishna later confided that my response to their newspaper ad had been the first one—this put me in the auspicious category. Everyone was eager to see who Nancy was.

In the group of twenty-five participants, there were a half dozen Europeans. As typical here for any spiritual lecture or retreat, three-fourths of the Indians participants are men. Of course, the events I attend are oriented to the intellectual aspects of Hinduism. If I were visiting a temple, the women would probably predominate.

In spite of the spacious quarters, that first night I cannot sleep for the noise. Evidently, a host of creepy crawlies appreciate the thatched ceiling for reasons other than beauty. Every time I am about to sleep, a strange noise sends a shock through my nervous system and wakes me up. It's mostly the lizards running about, and they also squeak. Then sometime past midnight, a car arrives, evidently with the main teacher, so a group of men are talking outside for over an hour. *I will not be able to spend another night like this,* I lament, as I crawl out at the 4:00 a.m. bell, feeling sure I have not slept at all.

Me—without sleep—becomes the worse creature imaginable. By constantly watching to keep myself in relaxed state, somehow I make it through the first day. Thank goodness, that night I collapse into such a deep sleep that an army brigade marching through the room could not have awakened me.

I am glad I managed to sleep because I am finding the material and the techniques are quite unique. The basic goal is make contact with one's inner *Guru*. A concept that certainly rings true for independent me. Best of all, I am able to meditate all day without any particular problem. That in itself is a positive experience for me.



Meditation hut with thatched roof

After several days, twenty or so participants are settled into quiet meditation, while the others have left. Shankar, the teacher, guides us into re-experiencing the enlightenment experiences and consciousness of a number of saints and sages. I know it sounds impossible, but Shankar proved to us that you can actually re-experience firsthand any event that you have knowledge of—like purposeful active imagination. The value of this particular exercise is to recognize the difference and uniqueness of each spiritual teacher. Even that concept intrigues me, for I had never really thought of enlightenment as being unique for different individuals.

Since I had been to the *ashram* of Ramana Maharshi recently, I had specifically read the description he wrote of his realization—so powerful it caused him to leave home. I find that his experience is particularly easy to tune in on—or imagine—if you prefer. Again, I am well informed about the realization of the Buddha; therefore, I had an incredible experience of quiet expansion in running that memory tape. Of course, I know I have a vivid, and a sensitive imagination—that's why I never ever

watch violent or horror films. However, everyone in the room seems to be successful with the technique.

Toward the end of the week, we all get ready for the big "trip" to *Satya Loka*. First, we have to go through several procedures for the purpose of clearing our *chakras* (energy centers along the spine). Also to prepare ourselves, we have been eating a sparse vegetarian diet and maintaining total silence, except for the one-hour classes of theory that Shankar gives each morning and evening when we can ask questions. When Shankar describes it, the trip seems easy, but I still have some intrepidity about my ability—good imagination or not. So to make it easy on myself, I create a huge golden eagle in my mind to carry me there. It was quite a trip; we even passed through an area with high rocky cliffs.

When I finally make it, I discover *Satya Loka* to be a totally golden region; that is, even everyone is radiant with a golden essence. I landed right in the central courtyard, which is a huge temple of golden columns just like the ones of the ancient Greeks. Across the front of the court is a wide staircase with about twenty steps. A verandah stretches across the top of the stairs with columns decorated with intricate golden festoons. In the center of this platform, I see the high court area—the real power spot. Later I seem to remember there were several people there, but at the time all I am aware of is a majestic throne with a deity, who appears to be the ruler of this region. At that moment, I feel too shy to approach him, so I sit quietly over to the side, beside a tall column. At this moment, I am not sure what to do. I wish I had thought of some question to ask. Obviously, this experience is in my own consciousness and it is up to me to use it for my benefit. I was so worried about making the trip that I am simply not prepared for being here!

The Vedas are fundamentally monotheistic, that is all gods and powers rest in the one fundamental supreme Brahman who is without any attributes. To the Hindu, if another religion worships another god, it's a "join the party; there's room for everyone" sort of attitude. For example, the Old Testament portrays an attitude in which the prophet Elijah killed the priests of Bal after besting them in a contest. In contrast, when Gautama Buddha defeated the scholars of his time in philosophical debate, they placed him in a place of honor in the Hindu hierarchy as one of the great Incarnations of Lord Vishnu. Again, centuries later when Adi Shankarcharya defeated the Buddhist thinkers, they became his disciples.

Apart from the intellectual debates and treatises, the populace kept worshipping their old gods. The old gods were needed; they were energy fields created for begetting earthly wealth in any and all forms. Nonetheless, no one doubts that Brahman was the Supreme. Even the most illiterate villager will know that the idol he worships is a symbol for a reality he cannot comprehend.
To illustrate this point, an intriguing story is given in the *Kena Upanisad*, one of the ten major philosophical treatises in the Vedas. In an insightful allegory, the teacher clearly elucidates the relationship between the gods and Brahman. The story goes like this:

One day there appeared in the heavenly realms a beautiful apparition, rather nebulous, but very pleasing to the eye. The gods were intrigued, so straight-away one of them set out to investigate the phenomenon. The first to approach the form was Lord Fire.

To introduce himself, he boasted, "I am Agni Deva; I am so powerful that I can burn up anything on earth with just the touch of a finger."

"Oh, really. I am certainly impressed," replied the apparition. "So why don't you just show me what you can do." With those words it produced a straw out of thin air and laid it at Lord Agni's feet. "Let me see you burn this straw."

With full confidence at the easy task, Lord Fire nodded his head, rolled his eyes, and struck the straw with his finger. Nothing happened. He trembled with disbelief, gathered his energy, and touched the straw again. Again nothing happened. Something very strange was going on. He shook his head in disbelief as he slinked back to the other gods who were observing from the sidelines.

When they heard the details, they could hardly believe such a strange thing. Incensed at this challenge to their power, Lord Wind volunteered that he would go and check out the apparition. He approached it and introduced himself, "I am Vayu Deva. I am so strong and powerful that I can make anything fly

through the air at great speeds."

"Oh, really. I am certainly impressed," ventured the apparition. "So why don't you just show me what you can do." Uttering these words, it produced a straw out of thin air and laid it at Lord Vayu's feet. "Let me see you move this straw."

Vayu Deva huffed and he puffed, but he could not move that little straw. He tried again and again. His head hung in embarrassment as he returned to his cohorts and told them that he certainly could not explain what was going on.

They all agreed that this was an assignment for Indra, the king of the gods (at least in the Vedic period before the gods of temple worship were created). He agreed to get this phenomenon straightened out once and for all. But strangely, as Indra proudly sauntered over to the form, it disappeared completely. Moments later, in its place materialized the Goddess Uma, who is both consort of Lord Siva and a teacher to the gods. They all fell at her feet and begged for an explanation of the strange occurrence.

When she spoke, she admonished them, "Where do you think you get your power? Have you forgotten that you are only instruments of one Supreme? Without that power, you can do nothing."

Later, Shankar questions me about my trip to *Satya Loka* to see if I had any particular encounter with the deity. He is quite scientific about keeping records to see if everyone experiences the same phenomenon. We discuss my reservations about deities and how I can find such a trip useful. Then, he mentions that if I keep my golden eagle, I can return any time I want to because there is even a huge library I can visit. "Oh, the eagle is not necessary, *Satya Loka* is just a thought away," I retort with a smile. "I just made things hard on myself." The devout Hindus have the concept of the "Lord of the Heart." This Lord will have a *mantra* associated with it that will have been handed down through their family or given by a *Guru*. To them this deity, who has long term associations, qualifies as their inner *Guru*. So I am not sure how the concept of inner *Guru* will apply to me. At the moment, I feel happy to sit in a very peaceful silence, and not to concerned about contacting any "*inner guru.*" Therefore, I am quite surprised, when suddenly, I see in front of me the shape of a *swami,* dressed in orange, sitting cross-legged, looking me straight in the face. It's not anyone I recognize, so at first I wonder if he has any significance. At the moment, with this question in my mind, the *swami* pops right into my heart center. About that time, Shankar turns on some music, which means we have five minutes until the session ends.

As the music begins to play, the *swami* begins speaking to me very softly in rhythm with the music: "My child, my child, my dear, dear child. Don't you know I've always been with you, always watching, always waiting. When you reached out to help someone, it was only I. When you reached out to hurt someone, it was only I. Always watching, always waiting. Never judging, never condemning. I was there—always watching, always waiting."

Suddenly, my mind flashes back to a silly incident from the past. "See, my child, wasn't I there even then, showing you the hollowness of life. You think much of your life was a loss and waste of time, but you were observing, you were learning. You were learning more than you think."

Tears start flowing down my cheeks as I feel the compassion and love. My mind feels as if it could accept the whole world without any complaint. What is it that makes us want to judge and limit this big beautiful panorama of a myriad of people places critters experiences. It is just too incredible to ever want to disturb. After a few minutes, I perceive that people are moving around a bit to limber up for the next 30-minute meditation session. I lie back on my straw mat and melt into a conscious contentment and peace. I sit easily through the next two or three 30-meditation periods in a truly deep silence. Later when I discuss the experience with Shankar, he feels that it was a relevant contact with my "*inner guru.*"

I left the retreat feeling quite enthused that my meditation practice had reached a new level. However, it was not the case. I was unable to sustain the energy on my own, so my meditation practice continued in its usual mode of ups and downs.

Over a year later, I have an opportunity to go to Jeevashram School to meet Vijay, the progenitor of the

retreat system. I wrote him of my desire to visit the school and meet him. Although I had not maintained the level of meditation, the experience of the retreat continued to remain a vivid memory. The school secretary had replied by return mail that I would be most welcome. Although Vijay is the principal *Guru*, I had not met him because he does not attend the retreats himself. Wishing to avoid the propensity of the Indians to hang onto *Gurus*, he remains at the school continuing his work as director and does not change his schedule at all during the retreats.

Since I wrote ahead, they know the approximate date of my arrival. The bus from the train station stops right in front of the school where I trudge up a dirt path to a long verandah with an office. The clerk there seems to know who I am, so, without any explanations, he accompanies me to a room further down the verandah. As we step inside with bare feet, I encounter a stout long-haired man about forty years old, seated behind a short-legged, rectangular table. The table seems to serve as a fortress to keep people at arm's distance.

Vijay is the brains and inspiration behind the meditation retreats. As he recommends to others, he lives a normal life in the world. He takes very seriously his job of running the residential school with one-hundred residential students and another fifty from surrounding villages. He is married to a dynamic woman who helps him immeasurably with his work of keeping up this little community. Vijay is definitely not the quiet scholarly type; in fact, he is quite talkative and animated. Every day he impresses me with his broad span of spiritual knowledge from every religious tradition.

During our first meeting, I mention to him my curiosity about my experiences in the retreat the past year. "As I had written you in my letter, when I came to India this time I really wanted to find an environment for regular and more intense spiritual practice. Not that I think I can sit and meditate all day; I know I can't—actually, I wouldn't even want to. However, when I sit to meditate, I want to be able to cut myself from the external and mental world to be at peace. That is my meditation goal.

"I had been in India for over a year when I saw the ad in the newspaper promising a trip to *Satya Loka*. Having studied Vedanta, I told myself: Well, it may not be highest enlightenment, but it's better than *Bhu Loka* [the earth realm]. At least it's a step in the right direction."

"I would say I went to the intensive with an open mind, willing to listen to the teacher, try the techniques, and then judge for myself. I'll have to say during the intensive I was quite pleased with the whole program. I found it easy to sit for the long periods, even though we did not even have a cushion. My meditation was quite deep and peaceful—even blissful part of the time. I felt good, like 'I am on track.' But the truth is, after the retreat, the lights went out completely."

"I see," Vijay comments. "Of course, we wondered what happened to you."

"I was quite disappointed when I was not able to keep up the momentum of that week. Of course, any experience is helpful in giving one a little faith. So this brings me to my essential question: Can one person actually help another on the spiritual path? Of course, I know it is possible to give another some guidance. At times, something a *Guru*, or even an ordinary persons, may say something that is helpful for another. But is it possible to really uplift another spiritually? How is it possible? That is what my basic question.

"Also can the upliftment be permanent or is it some 'golden carrot,' so the seeker then has some courage to plod on for himself." I seem to keep rattling on until Vijay picks up the thread and starts answering me.

Finally, he reacts, "Okay. I get your point. I know you must have heard of the morphogenetic field. If something happens to one member of a particular species, it can have some impact on the other members of the species even at a distance.

"To me the individual does not exist. There is no such an entity as a Nancy, or a Freddie, or a Shankar to me. The existence of different individuals is only a mental concept. In the intensive, we create an energy field, like a large balloon. If a human being is able to reach a high level of consciousness and hook onto

that expanded energy field for some time, then indeed there can be a permanent change. We expected to hear from you, but you didn't turn up. So that indicates it was only temporary in your case."

I interject, "In the intensive, Shankar said to practice the techniques for one year, then come back. So when I did not practice at all, there was no reason for me to contact you."

"Shankar was pleased with your experiences and your level of silence during the retreat. Actually, we expected to hear from you before now."

"You know one issue is my Vedantic no-god concepts. I knew that a trip to *Satya Loka* was not the highest, but I did not expect to see a deity there."

"Why not? *Satya Loka* has many teachers. If you would have investigated further, you would have found quite a variety of sages there."

The second day, I have a real surprise when I go over to the office to meet Vijay for afternoon tea. I find that Shankar has arrived and is sitting out on the lawn talking with Vijay. He expresses quite a surprise too; Vijay had not informed him of my arrival. We spend a great week discussing India, philosophy, and spiritual masters for hours on end. . . long into the night. I am continually impressed. They have unlimited knowledge of the many teachers and schools of thought, even European ones. However, Shankar's major influence was J. Krishnamurti. His mother has even translated some of Krishnamurti's books into an Indian language. On the other hand, Vijay has spent his whole life in spiritual inquiry and did not have one particular teacher.

Of course, I recount some of my adventures in spiritual India, but we do not speak of anything of a personal nature. However, one morning after Shankar returned to his home in Madras, Vijay takes the opportunity to make some personal comments to me.

"Your problem is you have no self-confidence. You think small concerning yourself," he begins.

"The truth is I have had no feedback in my life to build any self-confidence. Even in scholarly or creative endeavors, any praise has been extremely rare. My family has been particularly determined to see me in an inferior light."

"But you have a lot of clarity. You are quite precise when you communicate. Your intellect is quite fast in understanding my points. I feel we have been actually communicating this past week." He looks me in the straight in the eyes and asks, "Aren't we?"

"Yes, I do understand what you are saying."

Then he goes on to comment, "Your heart center is very good, especially for an adult. An adult's heart center will never have the purity of a child's. The quality of the heart center determines how others react and relate to you.

"Your *agneya* [third eye] center is good. This enables you to think so clearly.

"Your *vishuddi*, or throat, center is also good, so spiritual experience is possible. The throat center is the seat of communication. It must be open and in good condition to have spiritual experiences."

"Well, if you consider the heart center as compassion, the throat as communication and the third eye center as intellect, that is definitely where I live," I comment with a chuckle.

"So if these three higher chakras are in good condition, one can become a spiritual seeker. But then your *muladhara*, base chakra, is not as sound, so you do not get the required *kundalini* energy. Your *chakras* are bright, but the *muladhara* is not supplying the needed voltage to the other centers.

"So your concern now is the *muladhara*, the power supply. So that is the first step, to energize it, so the energy is maintained in the other centers."

“What are the causes of weak power in *muladhara?*”

As always, Vijay answers quickly, hardly pausing to think. It’s amazing to observe such an incredible brain in action. I wonder how he can stuff so much information into one small space. How is his brain different than mine?

“It could be due to your diet. At times, it could even be due to atmospheric conditions. It can simply be due to not having the right human company. Even being an object of another’s frustrated thoughts can suppress the *muladhara*. Another problem is, here in India, you have not been eating the high protein and nutritious diet that you are accustomed to, that could make a difference.”

“Really, I don’t know if that is the problem. The truth is, although I have a strong muscular frame, I have had low energy and lack of stamina all my life,” I comment.

Again he gives an immediate reply, “Also, your tendency not to have the confidence to think you can make your goals will definitely cause lack of energy. When I look at your aura, I see that you have spots on the area of your hands and your throat. Both the spots and streaks represent disappointments and frustrations—in general. In particular, the spots on the hands relate to frustration in action, and on the throat in communication. So although you have acted and communicated, even though it may have been appropriate, it has not been accepted by those around you.”

I return to my room with a lot to think over. I am sharing a room in the back of the large complex of buildings with a thin dark young woman, who turns out to be the teacher of Telegu, the language in this area. Exceptionally kind and cheerful, she totally takes me in tow to show me around. She always makes sure that I get my share of the food, saving a plate for me if I am delayed because of talking with Shankar and Vijay.

Interestingly, I am present one afternoon when her father shows up with a young man. I am wondering, *it’s the last week of school, why did he come all this way when she will be home in a couple of days?* She takes one look at the men and walks out of the room. I follow her, asking what is going on. Then she explains that her father has brought the young man to be considered as a prospective husband. I am utterly amazed that a father would just show up with an engagement proposal. But she is not fooled, she explains that since classes are nearly over, there is some time pressure. Her father wants to impress the young man by showing him that she is a school teacher. She then sends me to motion her father out of the room, so that she can confer with him privately.

Of course, the father is dumbfounded at being motioned at by a white face and approaches me very humbly. When he gets outside, he sees his daughter and understands, so they start conferring in the shade of a tree. Obviously, the young man has no idea what to do since he is left just sitting there in the room looking at me. After a few minutes, he gets the picture; he leaves the room and disappears down the path into the mango grove.

“But the young man appeared quite agreeable. Why didn’t you at least meet him?” I query her after her father left. After all, we are in India. Young people are lucky to be able to even have a look at their husband or wife ahead of time. This is progress.

“I’m not about to marry that idiot. I have picked my own husband—my cousin. My father doesn’t know it yet, but my mother does,” she informs me.

“And she approves?”

“Oh, yes. No problem there. But we aren’t so sure about my father. He has his own ideas.”

“And your cousin will be able to support you?”

“Yes, he has a shop. I will not have to work. I won’t be returning here to teach next year.”

The following day, an unpleasant incident informs me that the young woman is an untouchable, or a Harijan, as Gandhi called them. I had gone for a walk over to the nearby village—specifically to get a cup of tea. On my return, I run into the young teacher, so we return to the school together. June is India's hottest month; this one is no exception. It is devastatingly hot, so when we reach the school, I stop off at the nearest spot next to the girl's meditation hall to get a drink of water. I motion to her to come on and have some water. I notice she hesitates, but then she does follow me. Just as we are downing the water—Indian style, you do not touch the cup to your lips—Vijay's wife comes roaring up to us. She shouts something in Telegu at the young lady, who obligingly takes off.

I am aghast. How can anyone treat another in such a manner, especially a teacher in the establishment? Vijay's wife shrugs my astonishment off with the comment, "Those people can't come in here where we have our meditations." Again, this is India with all its contradictions. Fortunately, I have personally witnessed very few incidents of overt discrimination like this one in all my three years of travel.

Chapter Fifty-three

An Expression of Love

Although I was really on my way home when I stopped by here, at Vijay's suggestion, I decide to delay my departure. He recommended that I repeat the retreat, which is coming up in a couple of weeks. Once the school has closed, he gives daily classes on spiritual texts to a group of brahmacharis whom he is training to lead retreats. Nevertheless, he still takes some time to answer any questions. I usually attend the student's classes and likewise they join in on our discussions. In addition, an occasional visitor from Madras or Bangalore comes for a day or so and joins us.

All the young trainees are exceptionally bright talented intelligent kids in their late teens. Some of them, specially the girls, are unusually intuitive. Since their natural inclination is nurtured with the spiritual knowledge here, they certainly will have an excellent opportunity to live an authentic life. These young girls remember their past lives, even the details of their sexual activity, so they are not carried away with it now. In fact, they remember so much that they say that they are not interested in marriage. One girl saw that her son had difficulty weeping when she died, and her husband was actually relieved to see her go. So she is not eager to sign up for another forty years of cooking and housekeeping for that type of reward. When the girls start talking about marriage they are really hilarious because they really have some vivid insights. Even so, I remain the practical one and warn them that it's a bit early to cut their options. "The hormones may get you yet," I tease them.

One day Vijay tells me, "So you've been taking irregular steps: a little here and a little there; therefore, you have been making progressing even though you are not aware of it. You have been going to various seminars and retreats, getting some solutions and trying them out. So over-all you have come a long way. This is the only way a worldly person can function, along with their commitments, responsibilities, and jobs.

"To me, the best chance for enlightenment is in the thick of life anyway. One year you are intense, then you cool off. Then again you are at it, exploring in your own way. Actually, it is apparent that you have made progress because there is so much clarity in you—no matter what subject we are discussing. So tell me how many Nancys can you bring me? You see, it would be difficult to find another with your clarity and experience.

"You must begin to communicate and express yourself. The best thing is for you to attend the next retreat in Madras. That will help to give you confidence by removing some mental blocks and bringing up your *kundalini* energy. Remember *vak* (speech) and *kundalini* (coiled) are linked. So if energy is high a lot of expression will naturally be forthcoming."

At that time we had been joined by a Swede, Freddie, who had been in my original retreat, along with the gentleman who actually owns "God's Garden," where the retreats are held. They want to know more about the *kundalini,* and of course I am all ears.

Vijay opens up with his wealth of knowledge, "*Kundalini* is the finale of all psychic phenomena, even physical disease. If the person's *kundalini* can be tackled, any problem can be solved. That is why I tell people: Be functional, run a school, own a tea shop, whatever. To your *karma* [work] according to your innate talents, but with full awareness. So in the thick of life when you confront an obstacle, there is a chance you may get a *satori,* an insight.

“Subtle energy is a three-sided triangle: *kundalini*, breath, mind or insight. Whenever you have a mental insight, you change the *kundalini* and breath. If you change your breath, you touch *kundalini* and mind. So in the retreats we work on all three aspects together, this leads to transformation. A peak experience occurs when you have the meeting of all three.

“Maslow thought that you cannot have peak experiences at will. But you can have experiences if you maneuver these three. So western psychology does not have a handle on the *kundalini*, but we Hindus do. So that’s where the difference lies.”

We digress for five minutes’ discussion on Maslow’s system of human experience. Then Vijay continues, “Even such a simple thing as a change to a new environment can break up crystallized thought patterns and raise the *kundalini*. Europeans experience it when they come here, and Indians experience it when they go to America. People often experience a silence or bliss the first week. Again this is only *kundalini* phenomenon.

“To do anything big in life, even a Hitler, an Iococa, an Alexander, you need the power from *kundalini* support. Our best example is in the case of Mahatma Gandhi. He was virtually carrying the burden of the entire nation on his shoulders, so he needed a lot of *kundalini* energy for his brain to function at peak levels. One way to bring it up is through sexual stimulation. Now Gandhi was so righteous, he wouldn’t even sleep with his wife.

“You see, once *kundalini* is awakened, it has its own intelligence. It will find a way to get the task done, so this intelligence actually put the idea into Gandhi: You think you are such a celibate, why don’t you test yourself? Why don’t you prove it by sleeping with your young niece? She had told him, ‘I have no sexual thoughts.’ His logic was ‘so let’s conduct an experiment to test ourselves.’

“Then there were daily massages, therapeutic, of course, by young girls on his verandah. This all became a national scandal. Sardar Patel pleaded with him, but Gandhi insisted it was just a spiritual experiment. The truth is the *kundalini* was responding and maintaining itself at a higher level, so Gandhi could carry on his work.

“Gandhi was never aware what was really happening. His *kundalini* was strengthened, but he just kept saying, ‘I’m experimenting.’ But where was the need for continued experimenting. He had already proved his point again and again.”

“That must have been the same with J. Krishnamurti,” I venture.

“The very same. He was always holding hands with beautiful girls at meal times and even during the group discussions. He needed this *kundalini* supply in the brain, otherwise he could not keep up the energy. When creative power is drying up, it is one of the fastest ways to stimulate it. So it’s really a trap because they have to keep coming back to replenish the energy to keep up their level of achievement.”

“Is this always the case?” I question.

“No, not at all. It would be an individual thing. Then it would also make a difference if one were enlightened. The energy will not sustain itself until it has been ‘pinned up’ to the highest *sahasra chakra,* at the top of the head.”

After I attend the Madras retreat to get back on track, the next step is to assist Shankar with the retreats. I am really looking forward to working with him, for he is a great facilitator. He knows his material; he knows the techniques—but the main thing is he really cares about people. He and Vijay have been friends since they were small boys. Shankar’s mother tells me that one day, when they were in their early teens, they came home and announced to her that someday they were going to do something to make a positive difference in the world. She sees the retreats as the realization of that goal.

His mother also told me an interesting good Samaritan story about Shankar, which is quite informing

about the India milieu. Around Madras, he is known by Dr. Shankar, as he holds a Ph.D. in physics. Before he started the spiritual work, he worked in the scientific community for several years in Germany. Last year, he had noticed that two young scrawny children were always hanging out at a tea stall near his home. When he inquired he found out that they were actually living in the little square of dirt in front of the stall, awaiting the mood of the owner, who occasionally tossed them some bread. Upon finding out that they were orphans, Shankar took the responsibility of getting them placed in a local orphanage. This was possible only because his grandmother had founded the orphanage in the 1920's, so they accepted the two street children because of his familial connection.

In the meantime, the children's relatives found out that some "Doctor" had taken them and immediately began protesting that it was for some dark purpose and that he going to sell their kidneys "in the foreign" for lots of money. Not cognizant of the fact that Dr. Shankar was a Ph.D. physicist, not a medical doctor, they actually filed a complaint against him in the court.

Fortunately, again Dr. Shankar had family connections in the courts too, for his father had been a famous attorney who had dedicated his life to working for the poor. Therefore, the judge gave Shankar a fair hearing. Afterward, the judge had the staff of the orphanage bring the children to the sidewalk outside the courthouse, so the relatives could verify that the children were alive and well. Then they were whisked away back to the orphanage without further ado of emotional upheaval, since the relatives did not have any desire to make contact with the children. Their interest was in sharing the U.S. dollars Dr. Shankar was sure to have made. As usual, the many faces of India have both light and dark shadows.

In any event, I definitely feel honored working with Shankar, for I am sure I will learn a lot. The retreats are set-up to enable the participants to have a spiritual experience that will give them the faith to continue in their spiritual orientation in life. Many Indians have been repeating *mantras*, fasting, chanting—all types of spiritual disciplines all of their lives—but they have had no real spiritual experience. So the purpose of the retreat is to provide the sacred space and some techniques to have a breakthrough. Many of the participants, particularly the elderly ones, have beautiful experiences with very little encouragement. However, the majority do not. So by the second or third day, if they feel they are stuck, we start working on their "mental blocks." That's where I come in.

Mental blocks, or knots of the heart, occur when we say "no" to life. Naturally, many are laid down when we are young simply because of our miscomprehension of the circumstances. So I am able to help the English speakers, who are in the majority, unravel some of their misconceptions and hurts.

The Indians are incredibly open and honest in revealing themselves. The stories I hear over the next couple of months would break your heart. Their encounters between their traditional life and the modern methods produce saga after saga of stress and frustration. For the sake of the participants, I prefer not to reveal the particular stories. However, in general, many people persist vividly in my mind. The gentleman whose wife had immolated herself with kerosene while he was at work. The elderly banker who had to take all the bank books home every night to do all the entries to cover for the low-caste clerks who refused to do any work. The daughter-in-law who had to cook for the joint family even when she was ill. The son who was forced to marry so his mother could have a free servant in the home. The boy whose father beat him with a belt because he was not as smart as his other brothers.

Incredible stories; incredible people. Because they find that I am easy to talk to, I become personally involved with several of the young people. The burdens that these young people have to bear to be able to score the best grades, to get the best paying jobs, to marry according to the family's best interests. In short, they are being forced by their families to live a life not of their own choosing. Of course, I realize that there are thousands of happy young people who are generously supported by their families—both emotionally and financially. These retreats attract people with problems. As expected, the participants are all upper castes, the majority are *Brahmans*. Remember, that's the caste that has the most rules and duties!

Often when some mental blocks are cleared, the person experiences a powerful insight or even a beautiful blissful states. Some have wonderful breakthroughs. So my monthly trip to Madras turns out to

be a very rewarding experience. On the last day of the retreat, all the past participants would come for a reunion. I cannot describe how these people had changed. You could not even recognize some of them; their faces were so light and bright. This was occurring in a period of one or two months. It was phenomenal.

I can honestly say I have never experienced so much love. Do we even know what love is? Even if we feel love, we do not really know how to express it. We tend to use sex as our only expression. Instead of saying "the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak," Christ could have said, "flesh loves flesh." Flesh moves toward and connects with flesh, and we call it love. No wonder we often feel cheated, and continue looking for connection. Somehow our culture has not separated the different kinds of love. In both the ancient languages of Sanskrit and Greek, there are two separate words for love: people love and divine love.

In the future, whenever I feel unloving, or unloved, I will always remember the moments I spent in the meditation hall with these special people. I will know I have experienced real love at least once in my life. I truly love life, and I love life on this planet. There are so many lovely places I want to visit. For example, I want to see the hummingbirds and orchids of South America. Yet, sitting here in this meditation hall, I feel so complete, so content. I feel I could sit here for ever and ever, and never mind missing those orchids and hummingbirds.

After each retreat, I would return to Jeevashram to consult Vijay about any issue that had come up during the retreats—and to rest up. Unfortunately, I was finding the retreats quite physically exhausting. I would go through them fine, but afterwards I would crash, mainly due to the lack of sleep. Not only because the woman's quarters had become quite crowded with participants, but because the energy was so high I found it difficult to sleep. After one retreat, I was even ill with a fever, cough and had totally lost my voice. Fortunately, I found the correct homeopathic remedy, so I cured myself overnight.

Of course, when I return at Jeevashram school, I keep needling Vijay. How does all this beautiful phenomenon happen? He just kept telling me that it's all in each person—their total history and their total unfolding. Our role in the retreats was only to provide the environment and remind everyone of their true self.

Finally, I had to face the fact: Vijay is the Wizard of Oz. Instead of using a stage and screen, he is several hundred miles away. Even so, he and Shankar are creating an environment where people have faith in themselves. . . and things happened in the energized positive ambiance.

In the meantime, the kids return from school vacation, so Vijay is less available for discussions. He personally gives all the children classes in religion, and takes that duty very seriously. He teaches them something of all the major religions. Interestingly, he sees them as different facets of a perfect truth. Each religion emphasizes a different aspect of life: Islam has its strong moral foundation; Christianity focuses on the development of the heart; Buddhism develops the understanding of the mind and the spiritual path; whereas the Hindus are masters of the states of consciousness. He described to me how the children had wept tears when he told them about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In the evenings before dinner, the *brahmacharis* and I always join Vijay for discussions. Since the time available is short, they are more informal. We tend to discuss India phenomena—the realities here are mind-boggling—and endless.

Instances of sages bringing people back to life from death here are rare, but they do exist throughout India's history. Besides the case I already mentioned with Satya Sai Baba, I was also told of a case with a Sindhi sage. Vijay explains to us how it works. He says that a dead person can be brought back to life if the astral cord has not been severed, which is normally up to three days. What the sage actually does is concentrate so powerfully that he sucks the astral body back down into the physical body. The person then returns to the physical, so it appears as if the dead have been brought back to life. However, they were never completely dead.

All the Indians, residents and guests, join in the story telling, while I remain agog—with my tape

recorder on so I will not miss anything. One person from Kerala describes how the women there know how to produce a temporary stand-in. For instance, a young mother may be dying who has a small child. She will manifest out of thin air a nurse maid to care for and protect the child until he or she is grown. Then the stand-in dissolves back into the ethers.

Another recounts that the *Namboodris* (a *Brahman* caste in Kerala) have a secret technique of animating a dead body. For instance, if a man dies suddenly who has to be present at a function or needs to sign paper, the priests revive the body, so that it appears to function normally to the unsuspecting. The person has no intelligence; he may be able to answer yes or no, something typical of a simpleton. The family will cover for him saying that he is feeling ill today. If he is a religious man, they can say that it is his habit to always observe silence on this particular day of the week. The man does the necessary task and then they leave him to rest in peace.

Another area in which the Hindu sages excel is healing. Traditionally in south India, a person was not considered a true *guru* unless he could heal others. The *siddhas* (miracle workers) of Tamil Nadu would use bark, gum or roots of a specific tree to heal any and every ailment. When they died, they were buried under the tree and a small temple was built over them. The Salem and Vindhaya Hills were particularly known as a place one could go to find a *siddha* for healing. A small hospital in Madras uses the prescriptions that have been collected from various *siddhas*. Many knew how to communicate plants so that they could make a seed grow into a foot high plant in less than an hour. A variation on the theme is in Orissa. At an annual festival, the local *siddhas* feed thousands of people from one pot.

While it's true that the phenomena occur more in south India, particularly in Kerala and Orissa, everyone everywhere has some personal "*siddha*" story. I particularly liked the one about an American, who was the director of an American bank in Calcutta. He was embezzling a sizable sum of money. His clerk, an Indian, found out about it and confronted him. The director fired him on the spot for insubordination, but the employee refused to leave. So the American consulted a Bengali *siddha*. Afterwards, the Indian clerk started hearing the words whispered in his ears: "Get out. Get out." It nearly drove the poor fellow mad so he had to leave.

Just like anywhere else I have visited there is always a thread of the personal reality along with the spiritual life. My first month had been exceptional. But I definitely remember the first leak in the dike of Shangri-la. Before the children returned from vacation, the school principal sent out a letter to the parents in which was included a comment that there was an American woman at the school who was advising them on nutrition, so they could improve the quality of the meals. I do not know who came up with this idea, but it was not true. So I take it to be a hint of something that I can contribute. Immediately, I prepare a list of a few practical simple suggestions that are appropriate in our rural setting, including sprout salads.

At that time, Vijay's wife was responsible for the kitchen. She was livid at what she called "interference." From my point of view, it was hardly interference. Then there was the incident when she slapped a couple of girls until their faces were purple because they left a class early when their teacher did not show up. She got angry because I asked them what had happened and consoled them—real angry.

She is quite admirable in many respects. She is a very talented woman and a great boon to the operation of the school. Her coordination of the field hands, the orchard pickers, and the labors of any construction project is awesome. In addition, she personally cooked food for us during the school vacation, which allowed us to sit and discuss philosophy all day. She tried to get okra for her extraordinary okra curry at least once a week since I loved it so. Actually, her cooking was the best food I have had during my travels. Of course, no one can beat Usha's cooking when I am at "home" in Pondy. Furthermore, she was personally kind to me. When I came back from Madras once with head lice, she patiently combed through my hair, so I would not have to use the lethal shampoo to kill them.

Vijay is quite verbal about the importance of women on the planet. He never criticizes his wife. Well, he did say once that if she needed any improvemeent that she was a smart women, she would figure it out for herself. Several of our conversations have centered around women. He has the traditional Indian

point of view: woman is goddess.

One day he commented, “Throughout the world, throughout history, in whatever society, man has put woman down because of his superior physical strength. So we can say the physical has dominated. That is why man has not transformed. This is humanity’s greatest blunder. Woman has the intuition and she must be the teacher. But throughout history, in whatever culture, you find men are the teachers. So something has fundamentally gone wrong. If women were to lead spiritually, the world would be transformed. So men must learn to follow the woman. But if you say that in public, people get incensed. Men will reject it. Even some women won’t accept it either.”

I mention, “Yes, it was quite disappointing in the suffrage movement to find so many women were against women having the vote—even Queen Victoria.”

“See, what I mean. Part of my focus is to regain the balance. That is why at this school we are focusing more on the girls, with the hope that they will become the teachers. I believe the women must lead the way. Likewise, men should follow her example and advice. This means the man’s relationship with his wife must change.”

“Interestingly, during in my travels, I have noted that there are quite a few men who will consult their wives before they embark on a business deal. To obtain a more intuitive point of view,” I comment.

Vijay rejoins, “I’m glad to know that; it can make all the difference. Often someone comes and tells me, ‘Sir, I have a financial problem.’ I tell him: ‘If you go back home and treat your wife as a spiritual being, as a spiritual partner, I give you a guarantee, all your problems will be solved.’ Six months later he comes back and tells me, ‘You were right. It’s all solved.’

“So attitudes toward women must change. The truth is that if you treat a woman like a spiritual teacher, she becomes that. In fact, whatever you treat a woman like, she becomes. Her behavior depends on how you treat her. Treat a man with all respect and love, and he won’t change an iota. Give that same respect to a woman and she will transform.

“I have one girl here whose parents dropped her off declaring ‘she is a useless girl.’ Today she is a different person, but it is very difficult to transform the boys. It is much easier to work with girls and women. You just treat them as spiritual beings, from the heart, and they respond. Do the same thing to a boy or a man and there is simply no response. I’ve witnessed it again and again.”

Another time, he brings up the subject again when several families are visiting from Madras. I do not know if he knew they were having marital problems, or if he just assumed that in India, there will be inequality.

“Men have physical strength, while women have the mental/emotional strength. That’s actually why women live longer; their strength is more of the essence. Change in the very structure of our society has to occur. Today you look at any advertising—from razor blades, coffee, alcohol—a woman is always present to associate the sensual with the product, even men’s products. So women are constantly fed with this erroneous self-image. So man has pulled the woman down and fallen with her,” Vijay comments.

“Woman must be redeemed from her traditional role as a mere housewife, laborer, secretary. Man has to look after her. He has to put her up on a pedestal and make her his *Guru*. Here in India, we do have the tradition that the woman is spiritual, so men do get the point. But this is just not possible in the West because you do not have the model there that we have here. The woman may have been liberated in the Western countries, but she still does not have the respect she deserves.

“Unless man brings about a transformation in the psyche of the woman by putting her on a pedestal and suppressing his male arrogance, there is no hope for mankind. I am quite clear about that.”

These comments opened the couples up to discuss several of their particular problems. Vijay never

seems to get involved with the nitty-gritty of the situations; he just gives them the general format and they have to apply it to themselves.

Then one bright day, the bombshell hit. Vijay came up with an idea that we could have three times as many participants at the retreats. The buildings—which are already crowded—could be divided so that we could have three separate groups. Shankar would take the Tamil speakers, I would lead the English group, and the *brahmacharis* who are in training could handle the Telegu and Hindi speakers. I remind him that Shankar and I have already complained to him that we honestly are not effectively dealing with the fifty people who are now attending. True, part of this is due to the language problem; we always have at least four distinct language speakers in every retreat. I maintain if Shankar and I, plus a couple of the *brahmacharis*, are not able personally to handle fifty now, then if will be virtually impossible for one person to do so.

In addition, the kitchen facility is so small that the food is mediocre. Even serving tea or coffee is not possible. I always feel sorry for the participants who are having headaches from caffeine withdrawal while Shankar and I are happily sipping hot spiced tea during our breaks.

“Besides, the printed material emphasizes the benefit of a limited number at each retreat. So what about integrity?” I reproach Vijay.

“Integrity?” he bellows with a disdainful grimace. “Integrity—that’s a silly American thing. We play life looser here. We just can’t get uptight about these details.”

I was completely overwhelmed. The Wizard had come out from behind the screen and exposed himself to be someone I could not deal with. That evening as we sit out on the lawn, I tell Vijay that I have decided it is time for me to go home. He seems to be all right with my decision. Then suddenly, he comes to attention, “Does this mean that you will not attend the Madras retreat next week?”

“I will attend the retreat. Shankar is counting on me, and I certainly won’t let him down.”

I lean back and look up at just as a flock of eight white cranes are winging their way across the pastel blue evening sky. They had been a daily spectacle when I first arrived here. Then in the heat of the summer they had disappeared. Tonight they suddenly reappeared to bid me farewell. The cycle is complete.

Chapter Fifty-four

The Final Curtain

At home, I always think that I am too active, having too little time for solitude and meditation. Here I have been continually aware that I never achieve a balance either. At least I have had both extremes. When I am traveling or in the cities, I am thrown into a whirlwind of activity, yet away from the world I get so much solitude that I begin feeling useless. I keep thinking, wouldn't it be great to have a life with a little of both? Actually, that desire was the impetus for this trip.

My journey has touched many realities of time. . . physical as well as mental. I have seen people living in simple thatched-roof huts and been in modern high-rises in Bombay. I cannot believe I have been here for three years. Time has passed so fast. On the other hand, it seems as if I have been here forever. Time is such a strange measuring stick for our experiences. Mental time never seems to align with clock time. If we have a lot to do, an hour passes too fast; if we have nothing to do, that same hour can drive us to distraction. So the number of events has to do with our mental time. Of course when we sleep we totally lose our awareness of time. Since there are no events, mental or physical, there is no time. That must be why a quiet meditation of an hour, sometimes seems like ten minutes.

I have just finished my last retreat with Shankar as I had committed to do. Preparing myself mentally and physically for my return to U.S., I stayed in Madras to make the arrangements for my flight. Each evening I sit out on the verandah alone to watch as the stars emerge one by one out of the fading blue sky. What a treat have the leisure to sit out and watch this spectacle, I express my gratitude daily. In the still quiet atmosphere, my mind feels vibrant and alert from all my varied experiences.

Not that I am actually thinking anything. While the potential is there, my mind seems content to remain silent and alert. Secretly, I am watching and waiting for the first signs of the migrating birds. This is my favorite time on the Bay of Bengal coast. Somehow, the spring bird migration happens overnight; however, at autumn time, the spectacular flights spread out over a couple of weeks.

As the birds begin to fly by, I become fascinated noticing how each species has its own flight pattern. The perfect spot to watch the white cranes is on the roof of the home where I am staying, for they always fly about a city block inland. Most often, I see them in the early morning hours; occasionally, in the late evening, just before dark. One morning while I am sitting out with a cup of tea, a few snowy white egrets fly over. Before I know it a huge flock has extended over the sky. Their ivory wings spread wide seem to fill up the whole blue space. I am totally mesmerized as I behold them soaring overhead. Suddenly, the whole panorama becomes surreal and I forget where I am. The scene could be happening anywhere on the planet, or just in my mind.

In the evenings, I walk along the sea to watch the undulating panoramas of a variety of birds in flight. One group flies high over the edge of the sea; others fly about fifty feet out to sea and appear to skim above the waves. Another species of smaller birds wing their way hovering only ten feet from the shore line. I am filled with delight at watching this incredible sight. Each group is so bountiful that the birds are strung out for what seems like miles. Sometimes it takes five to ten minutes for an individual flock to pass by.

Where do these tiny creatures get the intelligence to know when and where to fly? What wonderful natural intelligence they possess. Scientists continue to tag them and wire them to figure out how they

do it, but the real miracle is that they do it.

The cycles of nature come and go on perfectly no matter what I am doing—or not-doing. Each morning as I sit on the verandah watching the white cranes pass over my head, I feel content. As I behold wave after wave of these beautiful birds flying across the bright sapphire sky, I feel that the world is complete. Maybe this is what my journey was about: Just experiencing perfect moments of contentment and peace.

My journey has been a process of stripping my mental layers to see what I can discover. Certainly, I peeled sufficiently to reveal my connection with nature. I am so grateful that I had the time to do so. I have experienced more of a me that I like: one who thinks for herself—I think I will keep that one.

I have had the time to live and breath. I have known incredible moments here. I do give dear Bharata and the Bharatis credit. Truly, India is the home of my heart. Has it made a difference? Does it have meaning for others? Will I be able to share the love I have touched in a hundred small and subtle ways?

I've touched the pristine earth,
Listened to a bird's song,
Smelled the sweetest jasmine,
Beheld a tiny sunbird bathing in a dew drop,
Marveled at a galaxy swirling in the face of a flower.

I've wrapped myself in cool silence of a starry night,
Watched a thousand stars bow to a rising sun.
Glided on the wings of an eagle across a crimson sea,
Inhaled the vibrant forest air,
Listened to the gurgle of a mountain stream.

Will I ever find a way to tell you
That this planet is a magnificent gem,
A crown jewel of god,
And so are you.

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After Thoughts

Home Previous Chapter Glossary

TO TELL THE TRUTH. . .

For two years, I have sacrificed a lot to be able to put this story down on paper. . . I mean that some days it was my poverty diet: bananas, celery hearts and hard-boiled eggs. Nevertheless, in many respects, it has been easy. I have experienced many delightful moments as I have relived each episode in my memory. However, the truth is my personal story did not have a happy ending—temporarily, at least. Since you know me by now, you will understand that I feel it would not be honest to not share that part since my story was often so personal.

As you can imagine from my many fascinating encounters, I came back to U.S. feeling full of life and joy. I felt I had so much to give and to share. I was quite surprised to find my friends and family had no interest whatsoever in anything I had done. Were they threatened by my lifestyle? I suppose the thought of spending three years traveling and exploring was off-putting to persons who were committed to sitting behind a desk all day. I honestly didn't feel that I was that different, but I realized I had been plopped into a world that I no longer knew. I wanted people to get excited, to go out and have an adventure, yet it appeared that people simply wanted me to sit down, shut up, and be content to push papers for some male (or female) chauvinist and complain about my lot in life, like everyone else.

You see the real reason I couldn't do that effectively is that at one time in my life I had the opportunity to realize material things were not going to get it for me. And I have been affirmed in that perception. I have had many peak experiences, and not even one of them was triggered by money or things money can buy.

However, I was being challenged to give up connection with people. Now really, this was asking too much of me. I was experiencing a deep depression; I had never experienced depression before in my entire life. I was also physically ill, which is a rare occurrence for me. I don't know how much that had to do with my mental state, but it obviously didn't help. I kept feeling something was being squashed out of me. I was forced to take a look at what I would label the transparency of Life. Certainly, it was my personal disappointments, and I took it personally. Sometimes it seemed like more than that. I wept for a world that didn't care, that wouldn't care, that couldn't see beyond today. Surely, I would continue to face many disappointments if I remained dependent on this world for estimating my value.

W*hat am I doing here?* I kept asking myself. The person who less than a year ago sat so peacefully feeling like a citizen of the world was now an alien in the land of her birth. Somehow I managed to keep going—but just barely.

I ended up in Sedona, Arizona. Frankly, I was not enamored with the stark, dry desert reality. I could hardly bear to take in all those red rocks. I wasn't able to do so for many months, even though I lived perched on the side of Sugarloaf Mountain with an incredible view of Oak Creek Canyon. Daily I was impelled to walk. Often I was up at dawn and completed two hours of hiking before breakfast time. Continually, I found a new place to explore, rarely hiking the same route twice. I breathed in starry nights, fed the quail, tanagers, orioles and hummingbirds, took care of a dear elderly lady, and put my shoulder out of joint digging up tiny plants to transplant into a wild flower garden. I had very little

contact with family or friends.

One clear breathless night, as I beheld a full moon creep over the dark red cliffs, I realized that all my pain was gone. The truth was clear; all I will ever be able to count on is myself. I am all I have; somehow I must be all I need. The world is what it is, and I am what I am. The next morning, I unpacked my computer and started writing about my travels—and travails—in India.

Although I had written journals during my travels, it took me several years to unravel the story on paper. The words kept stretching out to be an awesome thousand pages. Even though I cut many details, I embellished others. The finale of my journey occurred when I was working on the material of my stay at Jeevashram. I was going over my notes of several lengthy conversations with Vijay, which dealt with the *kundalini* phenomenon.

First, I realized that he had clearly told me, but not directly, that the experience I had in Bangalore was the awakening of my *kundalini*. Over and above that info, he talked about some manifestations caused by the biological process of *kundalini*. Here were all the answers to my dilemma of life upon my return to the U.S. Suddenly, I had the whole picture. I understood why I went through depression; why I didn't meditate regularly here; why I felt well for only short periods of time—usually when I was alone. Since I lacked valid interaction with the external world, I had been forced inward to process and develop my inner life. *Life encompasses it all*—it does not discriminate. Only minds discriminate.

I had had all the information I needed to go through the experiences with foresight, but the data had gone out of my head into a notebook, which had been packed away until now. I have to console myself with the thought that hindsight is far better than no-sight. Haven't I always said that I am one person who just has to find out things for myself. I feel much more integrated and centered. . . and free of this world called the "united states," even though most persons here prefer to navigate their lives in "scattered states."

What I have to say may not be relevant in the world today. I have come to understand that I dance to an uncommon tune. But I wanted to tell my story so that if it touches you, you too may have the courage to dance to your unique melody. I have nothing tangible to show for my story, yet when I lie down at night, I remember all my wonderful experiences and my sense of an expanded self and unbounded life. In those quiet moments, I am alive and content because I lived out my dream. I feel complete and I am grateful.

Glossary

of Indian Terms

To return to text, close or minimize this window

acharya: spiritual teacher, preceptor.

advaita [not divided]: the one unchangeable, indivisible Truth; the one essence that cannot be described as real or non-real. Adi Shankaracharya wrote extensive commentaries on the major Vedantic scriptures to prove this conclusion.

Agni: Vedic god of fire.

amma: mother.

ananda: divine bliss and happiness. A bliss that is not dependent on the objects or situations in the world or the mind, but inherent in each individual.

Aranyaka: the third section of each of the four Vedas that includes the explanations of the symbolism of the rituals and mental exercises for the contemplative life of the retiree *(vanaprastha ashrama)* to prepare him for the fourth stage of life *(sannyasa ashrama).*

Arunachala Mountain: mountain in southern India where Ramana Maharshi resided throughout his adulthood. In the *Puranas,* Arunachala is said to be the center of the universe.

Arya Samaj: Society of Aryans, founded in 1875 by the north Indian Swami Dayanand. He aimed to transform Hinduism from within by removing such extraneous, and often difficult to rationalize, elements as the *Puranas,* the epics that tell of the exploits of the various deities.

Arya(n): One of noble birth or character (Sanskrit). Also, the family of Indo-European languages, therefore, the nomadic invaders who brought a language of this group into India (and Europe) between 2,000 and 1,500 BC from the northern steppes.
asana: a particular posture or mode of sitting; a seat, stool, or pad for sitting.

ashram: monastery, hermitage, place of retreat.

ashrama: the four orders or stages of a Hindu's life—*brahmacharya* (student), *grhastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest-dweller), *sannyasa* (renunciate).

Atharva Veda: In general, this Veda contain rituals for dealing with practical matters of life in the world. Its philosophical section contains the *Mundaka, Mandukya* and *Prasna Upanishads*.

Atma(n): the essential Divinity, or light of consciousness, in each individual; often translated into English as “Self”. See Brahman.

Avatar: an incarnation of the Divine made flesh in response to the collective *karma* of the population of a given time, not because of individual, personal *karma*. Examples include Rama, Krishna, the Buddha.

Ayurveda: a system of the ancient knowledge *(veda)* of health and medicine that is so comprehensive it includes descriptions and drawings of the tools used in major surgeries. Its validity is now recognized by modern medical science.

Badrinath: one of the four great Himalayan pilgrimage centers; the *Matha* established by Adi Shankaracharya in the north for the preservation of the Hindu scriptures.

bhajan: devotional hymn or chant.

Bhagavad Gita [Song of the Lord]: a major scriptural poem contained in the *Mahabharata* epic. In the eighteen chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna gives the Divine Truth to his student Arjuna in the setting of the battlefield of the dynastic war between the Pandavas and Kauravas. The *Gita* is therefore intended as a practical guide to persons attempting to live a spiritual life in the world, rather than for renunciates.

bhakti/bhakta: devotion/devotee. Bhakti Yoga is the path to enlightenment through devotion to God, the Truth, or a holy teacher.

Bharata: India, the traditional name the Indians call their countr. The home of the ancient

clan of Bharatis, or "Sons of Light,"which was held together by a strong cultural and religious bond based on the Sanskrit Vedas. The area is believed to have extended from present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan on the west to Burma on the east, from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean on the north and south. Note: Bharat in Hindi; Bharata in Sanskrit.

bhiksha: food obtained by begging or asking for alms. Also, the meal served when a sadhu is invited into the home.

Brahma (masculine gender): the deity of the Hindu trinity who is the creator of the universe. Do not confuse with Brahman, see below.

Brahman (neuter gender): the impersonal God, devoid of all qualities; the Omnipresent, All-pervading, Transcendent Reality. This supreme Reality is called Brahman when regarded as transcendent, and Atman when regarded as the Life Principle in the individual person. [Brahman *is written in plain letters in the text.]*

***Bra*hman (Brahamana)**: the highest of the four Hindu castes. The priestly caste consists of many sub-castes depending on the area the priest comes from and the duties he performs, such as temple priest, family priest, astrologer, teacher, cook, etc. *[Brahman is written in italicized letters in the text.]*

Brahma(n) Sutras: one of the three authoritative books of Hinduism in which Sri Vyasa encapsulated the principles of Vedanta in 551 terse statements. These short verses were originally intended for ease of memorization, thereby ensuring their availability for mental reflection on the great truths of the *Upanisads* at any time or place.

Brahma(n) vichar: continually thinking on the nature of Brahman, the eternal Truth.

Brahma(n) vidya: knowledge of the eternal Truth, Brahman.

brahmachari (m), **brahmacharini** (f): One who moves in Brahman; that is, one who continually fixes the mind on the eternal Truth. The more common meaning is student, or one who practices spiritual discipline and celibacy.

brahmacharya ashrama: the first of the four stages of life in the Hindu system. This period of life, usually from five to twenty-five years of age, is allotted to general education and the study of the Vedas for the understanding of, and preparation for, life.

Buddha [one of true wisdom]: Buddha is a title bestowed on an enlightened master. The Buddha in the present cycle is Siddhartha Gautama (563 BC) who was born in a small kingdom in present day Nepal. After a renunciation of his kingdom and a long period of asceticism, he became enlightened and began teaching. His sermons form the school of philosophy called Buddhism.

caste: There are four castes, each with its own duties, rules, regulations and hierarchy. Within each caste there are hundreds of subcastes, variations and hierarchies. *Varna* (caste) is usually translated as "community"; by Indians, for it means much more than a single category. It means where one is from, how one dresses, what one eats, the language one speaks. Traditionally, there was flexibility in the caste system, according to one's talent. For example, Mahatma Gandhi's father, from the grocer-*Vaishya* caste, served as a counselor to a king, the traditional role served by a *Brahman(a).* On the other hand, J. Nehru was a Kashmir *Brahman* (considered a lower status in the *Brahman* caste hierachy); however, he and his father were attorneys, a *Kshatriaya* caste function. Having had to withstand the foreign invasions of religious fanatics, both Moslem and Christian, for some 1,000 years, the Indian system has continued to crystallize and become rigid in order to protect the culture and religion.

The highest caste is the *Brahman(a),* or priest, teacher, scholar, advisor group. By virtue of their position in the society, they have more duties and are accorded heavier punishments than the other castes. For example, in the *Mahabharata*, a group of men had committed a crime. The *Brahman(a)* was given the death sentence, while the ones of lower castes were given sentences in prison, varying according to their caste.

The *Kshatriya* caste is referred to as the warrior caste. This caste includes everyone from the king to the foot soldier, their wives and children. In modern times, they have been court judges and administrators. Only *Kshatriyas* went to war, leaving the rest of the population free to carry on with their respective duties.

The third caste is the *Vaishya,* or merchant and farmer category. In general, this has been the wealthiest caste.

The fourth caste is the *Shudra,* or service caste. Anyone who performs services in the

community, such as office executives, clerks, secretaries and persons in banking, communication and medical services.

Champak: a tree of the magnolia tree with small cream-colored blossoms that are very fragrant. A mature tree can reach 30 feet in height.

chandala: untouchable; one outside of the caste system. The outcastes were generally of the aboriginal native tribes.

Chandrakaladhara, Lord [moon + small part + ornament]: During the churning of the milky ocean by the gods and the demons, "Chandrakala" emerged on the day of the new moon. The gods prayed to Lord Shiva to wear this crescent moon on his head as an ornament with the hope that it would help cool his destructive anger.

Cochin: port city on the Malabar cost of the Arabian Sea; also the pre-independence kingdom that included the cities of Cochin, Ernakulam and Trichur.

Congress (Indian National Congress): Organized in 1885 with the assistance of Allan Hume, a retired British civil servant, for the purpose of giving Indians more voice in public affairs. Congress was the principal political organ in India's struggle for independence and remains the major political force in modern India.

dal: dried beans that have had the outer husk removed. Any bean or pea may be made into a dal. Also, any soup or curry that is made from a dal.

darshan: to see or view, usually used in the context of "beholding"a holy person or an idol.

deva (m), **devi** (f) [*dev* = to shine]: god/goddess. All Vedic gods are functional names of the one supreme creative power manifesting in myriad forms; therefore, these deities, or shining ones, preside over and have the power to bless various activities in the world. In the context of Vedanta, the gods are symbolic of human inner psychological powers representing one's ability to bless or curse oneself.

dharma [*dhr* = to support, sustain]: the inner essence or very foundations of a thing or being. *Dharma* may be translated as law, duty, harmony or essential Truth, according to the context.

dharma shala: overnight abodes or hostels that were constructed by pious people or kings to provide free food and shelter to traveling pilgrims.

dhoti: The traditional men's wear in many parts of India, which is a large rectangular cloth, wrapped around the body like a skirt and tied at the waist. Called a *lunghi* in Kerala.

Dravidian: the principal indigenous culture and language on the Indian sub-continent. It remains the source of the South Indian culture and language, Tamil, of today.

enlightenment: the direct experience that the individual Self *(Atman)* is one with the supreme Self *(Brahman)*; also referred to as realization, Self-realization and liberation. The Sanskrit terms for enlightenment are moksha, mukti and nirvana.

Gandhi, Mahatma (Mohandas K.) (18969-1948) : The leader of the Indian nationalist movement who voiced the ideal of non-violence. He dedicated his life to searching for Truth and devising programs for the improvement of the lives of the impoverished masses of India.

Ganesha: the elephant god of great wisdom and strength who is worshiped first in any ritual or new enterprise. He is invoked to remove obstacles in the practical matters of success in worship or in worldly endeavors, or to remove obstructions in spiritual practices done to attain enlightenment.

Ganga: a river flowing from the high Himalayas, said to originate in the heavens. It has sustained a flourishing civilization along its banks for several millenium. (Mispronounced "Ganges" by the British.)

Gangotri: one of the four great Himalayas pilgrimage centers. It is near the source of the Ganga.

Gaudapada, Sri (700 AD): the guru of Govindapada Acharya, who was the Guru of Adi Shankaracharya. He authored the *Mandukya Upanishad's Karika,* or commentary.

Gayatri: the most sacred verse in the Vedas (Rg III, 62:10) that invokes the Solar Deity, Savitri, for wisdom in daily living. It has been used in daily worship and in initiation ceremonies throughout the ages in Bharat.

ghat: slopes, steps; the steps that line the sacred rivers and temple pools to enable the

worshipers to easily enter the water for a purification bath; therefore, also the most sacred places along these pools and rivers. The term ghat is also used for mountain ranges, such as the Western Ghats that borders and defines the state of Kerala.

ghee: butter that has been clarified using fire.

Gita: See *Bhagavad Gita.*

grhastha ashrama: the householder, or second stage of life of the Hindu. The householder lives according to a behavioral code given in the *Dharma Shastra.* In addition, he daily performs certain required rituals.

guru [one who dispels darkness]: a spiritual teacher who initiates seekers into the secrets of the sacred scriptures by the clearing of ignorance and misconceptions of life, thereby revealing the Eternal Truth. Colloquially, a teacher of any specialized knowledge.

Hanuman: the deity of wind and mental prowess. As the hero monkey who aided Lord Rama in the battle against evil, he exhibited great qualities as a supporter of *dharma* and devotee of the Lord. He is therefore idolized throughout India, particularly in the North, in the region of Rama's ancient kingdom.

Hara: an epithet of Lord Shiva.

Hari: an epithet of Lord Vishnu.

Harijan: children of God; a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi for the Untouchables.

Havan: a fire ritual accompanied by the chanting of the sacred Vedic mantras for a communal or common purpose. In the Vedic age, *Havans* were performed to give offerings of *ghee,* milk or grain to please the deities. With the later philosophical development of Hinduism, their purpose evolved into a method of practicing renunciation.

Indus Valley Civilization (ca. 4000-1,500 BC): an advanced civilization in ancient India concurrent with the Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations. Numerous sites of ruins lie along the Indus River in present-day Pakistan.

japa: repetition, usually mentally, of a mantra to exclude all other thoughts and to build the power of concentration of the mind.

jnana: knowledge; wisdom of the absolute Reality.

Kailasa, Mount: peak of 22,280 feet in southwest Tibet in the Kailasa Range of the Himalayas. The pilgrimage path that girdles it is thirty miles long and reaches a height of 18,000 feet at one point. It is also called Kamgrimpoche (Tibetan).

karma [kr = to do]: action, work, deed; the sum of the effects of past actions producing results in the life of the world. According to the context, *karma* can be translated as destiny (the results of past actions) or duty (actions intended to produce good results in the future). In the Vedas, *karma* means only the action of performing the prescribed rituals.

karma phala: fruit, results, of actions in the world.

Kedarnath: one of the four great Himalayas pilgrimage centers.

Kerala: the Indian state established after Independence in 1951, composed of the small kingdoms on the Malabar coast of the Arabian Sea in which Malayalam was spoken, including Travancore, Calicut and Cochin.

kovalam: geometric or floral designs made by the south Indians in front of their homes each morning. Traditionally, *kovalams* were made with rice powder to feed the birds and tiny crawling creatures. Now, they just use a white chalky powder for the *kovalam,* which is created anew daily.

Krishna, Lord: the ninth and most beloved *Avatara.* His life was immortalized with Sri Vyasa's *Bhagavatam* and *Bhagavad Gita.*

Krishnamurthi, Jiddu (1895-1986): Born in Andhra Pradesh, he was groomed as a messianic figure by the theosophist Annie Besant. In 1928 he repudiated his role as the World Teacher and, to some extent, the role of all spiritual teachers. He spent his life principally in Europe and America writing and lecturing-being a spiritual teacher.

Krishnastami Day: Lord Krishna's birthday. He was born after midnight on the eighth day of the dark moon in the month of Sravana (July-August) in a prison in Mathura.

kula guru: spiritual teacher of the household or clan.

laksharchana [*lak* = one thousand]: worship by chanting the one thousand name of a god or goddess.

Lakshmi, Sri: goddess of wealth and good fortune; symbol of auspiciousness and grace. Also called Sri, which means auspicious.

Lalita: an epithet of Parvathi, wife of Lord Shiva.

lila: divine play, particularly of the gods.

Madrasi: resident of Madras. During the British Empire the Madras Presidency included the sourthern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Mysore and Andhra Pradesh.

Mahabharata: an epic poem of ancient India detailing the history of the evolution of mankind through the lineage of the Bharata family. Written by Veda Vyasa, the poem of 100,000 verses is the longest epic poem in the world. It also contains the philosophical treatise, the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Maharaja: great king; can be used as both a secular and spiritual title.

maha samadhi: the great or final *samadhi*, that is, the death of a sage. Therefore, the burial place of a sage is also referred to as a *"samadhi."*

Mahatma: great soul.

mala: rosary used for meditation. It usually consists of 108 beads with a central (meru) bead, or turning bead, to enable one to count the number of repetitions of the *mantra* while chanting.

Malayalam: the native language of Kerala that originated with the Dravidian Tamil although it has numerous additions from indigenous influences and from Sanskrit. It is considered to be the most sanskritized of the native Indian languages.

mantra: a sacred syllable, word or phrase that represents the eternal Truth. *Mantras* may be used in daily life for protecting the mind from falling into agitation and for spiritual evolution by reflecting on their significance.

master: In India and Hinduism, the term refers to one who has mastered himself and has thereby mastered life.

Mandukya Upanishad: a philosophical treatise in the *Atharva Veda*. It is considered to be the most terse, yet most sublime and complete, of the *Upanishads*.

matha: monastery, seminary; one of the four centers established by Adi Shankaracharya for the preservation of the four Vedas and other sacred scriptures: Badrinath (north), Shringeri (south), Puri (east) and Dwaraka (west). These four *mathas* have established subsidiary *mathas* in their respective districts, such as at Kanchi and Kavir.

mauna: silence, the practice of maintaining silence to prevent the dissipation of energy to exercise discipline over the sense organs.

Moghul: a dynasty established in India in the 16th century by Babur, a Mongolian/Turk; also a civilian of this dynasty.

monsoon: seasonal rain-bearing winds that inundate most India with rains from June 10 to September 10 each year, except the southeast coast, which has rains from late November through January.

lunghi: Malayalam word for a wrap-around cloth worn as a skirt by both men and women in Kerala (*dhoti* in Hindi). The mundu is the top cloth worn over the shoulder.

Nandi: the bull that sits in front of all Shiva temples. It faces Shiva, indicating that the materialistic, instinctual nature of creation is at peace when focused on Lord Shiva.

Narayana, Jaya Prakash (1902-1979): the founder of the Congress Socialists in the early 1930's and leader of the Socialist Party. He was one of the few Indian nationalists educated in America and this experience influenced his emphasis on industrialization in India. In 1956 he withdrew from formal politics to serve his countrymen in what he felt was a more practical manner by establishing the Sarvodaya (Upliftment of All) Foundation. His devotion to the cause of India's independence and resulting respect from the people was equal to that of Nehru.

Narayana: an epithet of Lord Vishnu.

Narayana Guru (1856-1928): Born in the low Ezahava caste in Kerala, he was a respected reformer who spent his life building temples, teaching Vedanta and preaching against social injustice.

nawab: the king or ruler of the Moslem kingdoms.

Nehru, Jawaharlal (1889-1964): first Prime Minister of independent India. He and his father, Motilal Nehru, were prominent leaders of the nationalist movement and Indian Congress Party from the 1930's.

Nilgiris: the Blue Mountains, a long chain of mountains in southern India. They are mostly in Tamil Nadu, but part of them are in Karnataka and Kerala.

nimbu: India lime, which is more like a cross between a lime and a lemon.

nishkama karma: action performed without the taint of personal desire for results or reward.

OM (aum): a mystic syllable that represents the higher Reality, Brahman. It begins all the sacred scriptures and all prayers. Its significance is expounded in the *Mandukya Upanishad.*

OM namah Shivaya [surrender + (to) Lord Shiva]: The *mantra* emitting the highest vibration of the seven seed sounds (such as *eim, srim, krim, hrim*) defined by Adi Shankaracharya in the “Karpooradi Stotram.”

Panchadasi [fifteen]: Vedantic text of fifteen chapters written by Swami Vidyaranya. It is an advanced introductory text *(prakarana grantha)* intended to unfold all the subject of Vedanta necessary for enlightenment, or to serve as a foundation for further study of Vedanta.

parampara: a line of teachers established by the handing down of the Eternal Truth from teacher to student.

prakarana grantha: introductory Vedantic texts that unfold the entire subject matter of Vedanta with or without reference to any of the terse *Upanishads.* The purpose of these texts were to explain all the concepts necessary for enlightenment in simple terms, so the subject could be understood without having to resort to the study of the thick scriptures and the lengthy logical analysis typical of the scholarly approach. Some of the most known are *Atma Bodha, Vivekachudamani, Panchadasi, Vedanta Sara, Vedanta Paribhasa.*

pranam: a prostration; often used as a salutation to show respect to a holy man.

prasadam: food, usually sweets, offered to the gods during a ritual. Afterwards, it is distributed among the participants as a consecrated offering along with ash, sandalwood paste or other items used in the worship.

Prastana Treya: the three foundation scriptures of Vedanta: *Bhagavad Gita, Brahma(n) Sutras* and the *Upanishads.*

prem: divine, selfless love, as opposed to romantic, self-centered love.

puja: worship, ritual; *pujya:* worshipful.

punya: good *karma,* or merit, accumulated from good actions.

Puranas: epics, or ancient legendary histories compiled by Veda Vyasa. There are eighteen *Puranas,* each of which contains the following five topics: 1) cosmology with various symbolic illustrations of philosophical principles, 2) secondary creation after periodic annihilation, 3) genealogy of gods and saints, 4) descriptions of the great epochs, 5) history of the royal dynasties.

ragi: Indian millet. It is dark brown when cooked and is the principal grain of many of the tribal and rural people.

raja: king in the Hindu kingdoms in India; the king of a large or prosperous kingdom was a *maharaja.*

Rama, Sri: the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu; the hero-king of the epic Ramayana, who was the model of piety, morality as well as ethical behavior in the performance of worldly duties.

Ramakrishna, Sri (1836-1886): A Bengali sage who accepted and demonstrated the

essential unity of all religions. He was the Guru of Swami Vivekananda, Swami Brahmananda and other founders of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950): A spiritual master who left home at sixteen years of age after an experience of enlightenment to spend the remainder of his life at Arunachala Mountain, meditating and teaching those who came to him. Ramana Maharshi is considered to be the last of the line of authentic sages of the ancient tradition. Somerset Maugham visited the sage in 1938, and later used him as the model for the holy man in *The Razor's Edge.*

Ramayana: the history of Sri Rama; the epic poem of 24,000 verses, written by Sri Valmiki. The Ramayana dramatizes the trials of the individual, represented by Sita, in spiritual evolution.

rani: queen in the Hindu kingdoms in India.

rishi: a divinely inspired poet or sage; usually refers to the original preceptors of the Vedas, the original Hindu scriptures.

Rishikesh: a traditional spiritual center of the Hindu sages and *sadhus.* It lies at the foot of the Himalayas on the River Ganga.

Rg Veda: The oldest Veda, therefore, it contains much historical information. It is the only Veda that appears to have been partially formulated outside of India. The verses are metrical and intended to be recited aloud for the invocation of the deities during the sacrificial fire ceremonies. The *Aitareya* and *Kausitaki Upanishads* comprise its philosophical section.

roti: flat, round, unleavened wheat bread that is baked on an iron griddle, often called *chapati.*

rudraksha: a seed from a tree found in the Himalayas that is used for the beads of malas. In addition to its medicinal properties including regulating blood pressure, it is believed to emit a peaceful vibration conducive for meditation. The Gauri-Shankara *rudraksha* is a rare double seed that is used as the turning bead on a *mala.* In addition to its rarity, the double *rudraksha* is valued as a symbol of creation, the wedding of matter and spirit.

rupee: the Indian unit of currency; in recent years the value has fluctuated between 25 and 50 rupees per U.S. dollar.

sadhana: spiritual practice; any discipline performed for the purpose of turning one's mind from the world and applying it to the spiritual truths.

sadhu: a practitioner of spiritual and virtuous values; in common usage, a *sannyasi* or wandering mendicant.

Sama Veda: The third and most poetic of the Vedas, whose mantras are to be sung during the sacrificial fire ceremonies. It contains the *Chandogya* and *Kena Upanishads.*

samadhi (*sama* = steady + *dhi* = intellect): a calm and pure mind in all circumstances, whether sitting in meditation or acting in the world. Also, a trance-like experience of divine ecstasy.

sambhar: a thick soup made of *toor dal*, vegetables, chilies and spices.

samsara: the process of the wordly life through successive births and deaths.

sannyasa ashrama: the fourth ashrama in the four stages of the Hindu's life. At this time, the life in the world is renounced for the purpose of attaining enlightenment. Vows are administered by a sannyasi renunciate.

sannyasi: one who has renounced the world by taking the *sannyasa* vows.

Sanatana Dharma (Eternal Truth): the eternal principle of life that is the essence of all religious teachings; that knowledge, which remains, unchanged in all periods of time and states of consciousness. The religion based on the Vedas, which is best known by its foreign label of Hinduism.

Sanskrit: that which is well, or completely, done. The oldest language of mankind; the language of the original Hindu scriptures, developed for the communication of spiritual ideas and concepts, not for dealing with worldly or mundane concerns.

Saraswati: goddess of speech and learning who is the consort of Brahma, the creator.

sat: the essence of being, the essential, the true.

sat-chit-ananda: term used to express the ultimate experience of oneness: *sat* = Truth, Existence; *chit* = intelligence, consciousness; *ananda* = divine bliss.

satsang: association or nearness with the virtuous; therefore, discussions with, or time spent in the presence of, spiritual masters.

sattva (n.), sattvic (adj.): one of the three modes *(gunas)* of manifestation: *sattva* = calm, peaceful; *rajas* = active, agitated; *tamas* = dull inactive.

Savitri: The divine Solar deity, or the vitalizing power behind the visible sun, immortalized in the *Gayatri Mantra*.

Self: The nearest English equivalent of the Sanskrit word "Atman", the essential Divinity of an individual.

seva: noble, altruistic service.

sevak: one who does *seva*, or service.

Shankara: an epithet of Lord Shiva; see Shankaracharya, Adi.

Shankaracharya: title given to the head of each of the four mathas set up by Adi [first] Shankaracharya and their subsidiaries.

Shankaracharya, Adi (730-820 AD): the great master of *Advaita* Vedanta who synthesized the Vedantic teaching with clear commentaries, wrote many scriptural books, as well as composed beautiful devotional hymns; commonly referred to by the name: Shankara. He renovated and established temples and founded *mathas* in the four directions in India for the preservation of the Vedas.

shastras: all the scriptures of the Hindu religion.

Shiva: the third god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the task of destruction, thereby enabling regeneration.

Shivaratri: Shiva's night; the fourteenth day of the dark half of the month Magha (February) on which a rigorous fast is observed in honor of Lord Shiva.

Shringeri: The *matha* in the South established by Adi Shankaracharya in approximately the seventh century.

Shruti [shru = to hear]: the Holy Scriptures that were heard by the ancient *rishis* through direct revelation; the Vedas.

Sri (m), **Srimati** (f): a title of respect used in direct address or in writing; equivalent to Mr. and Mrs. in English.

swami (m), **swamini** (f): the title used by a *sannyasi* who has taken the vows of renunciation; literally one who is with oneself.

Swamiji: term used when directly addressing a *swami*, the suffix *"ji"*added to a name indicates respect in direct address.

Tamil: the language of the Dravidians of South India, from which Malayalam is derived.

Tamil Nadu: the state of South India in which Tamil is spoken; its capital is Madras (presently Chennai, its pre-British name).

tapas: to shine, blaze or converge inner heat. Austerities on the physical level include yoga postures; on the mental level, consistent concentration; on the intellectual level, applying the concentration and thought to a divine ideal.

Tilak, Bal Gangadar (1856-1920): One of India's first prominent nationalist leaders. His efforts towards India's total independence earned him the title of Lokamanya, "Respected of the people."His efforts were rewarded by a term of six years (1897-1902) in British prisons in India. He developed the ideas of passive resistance, boycotting of British goods, organization of mass opinion, and other political tactics that were later adopted by Mahatma Gandhi. Because of his words, "*Swaraj* [self-rule] is my birthright,"he has been called the Patrick Henry of India.

Trivandrum: capital city of Kerala in the former princely state of Travancore.

Tungabhadra River: a sacred river that flows through Mysore and part of Andhra Pradesh

to merge with the larger Krishna River in Andhra Pradesh.

turya: the substratum in which the waking, dream and sleep are perceived in the phenomenal or waking point of view; for convenience, it is referred to as the fourth, or turya, state of consciousness. It can be compared to water, which appears in the three states of ice, liquid and steam.

Upanayanam: the sacred thread ceremony for the bestowal of the *Gayatri Mantra*. The ceremony for the purpose of "bringing near or leading to"the Truth is performed by a priest and presided over by the father of the boy being initiated. India's law-giver, Manu, states the appropriate age for the receiving of the thread as five years for a *Brahman*, six for *Kshatriya*, and eight for a *Vaishya* (*Code of Manu* ii, 37-38).

Upanishad (seated below): the culmination, or philosophical section, of each of the four Vedas that reveals the essential oneness between God and man. These treatises are believed to have been compiled from 800 to 500 BC. They were meant to be taught by an enlightened teacher to students of a humble and receptive attitude, that is both mentally and physically "seated below."

upasana (seated near): being near to the Lord through continual mental visualization of his form.

Uttarkasi: the Himalayan mountain village that has been the residence of many sages, including Swami Tapovanam.

vanaprastha ashrama: the third stage of a Hindu's life. As a forest-dweller, he lives in semi-retirement at the edge of the family estate where he is separate from the family, but available in an advisory capacity as his sons take over his former duties. He passes the day in contemplation and study of the *Aranyaka* section of the Vedas.

Varanasi: considered the holiest city in India by the Hindus. Its historical name was Kashi. (Re-named Benares by British).

vasana: innate tendency. These subconscious tendencies color all levels of our personality: our perceptions, emotions, thoughts and actions. It is postulated that they are brought with us into this life from previous births.

Vedanta (end of knowledge): system of non-dualistic philosophy based on the *Upanishads*, which are found in the last section of the Vedas. Vedanta proves the non-difference between the individual Self *(Atman)* and the Supreme Self *(Brahman)*.

Vedas: the four principal books of sacred knowledge: *Rg, Yajur, Sama* and *Atharva*. Each Veda is divined into four sections to guide the four *ashramas* (stages) of life. The first, or *Samhita,* section contains the many mantras, which are hymns, prayers and formulas to be used in the various rituals during the *grahastha ashrama*. The second, or *Brahmana,* section is commentary on the meaning of the *mantras* with directions for their use in various rituals to produce results in worldly endeavors. The third section consists of treatises for contemplation and study including the symbolic meanings of the elements of the rituals. These mental exercises are meant to be used by those of the *vanaprastha ashrama*. This section is therefore named the *Aranyaka* or forest treatises. The fourth section contains the philosophical treatises, the *Upanishads,* intended for the final realization by those in the *sannyasa ashrama.*

Note: You may use any of the above definitions in any worthwhile endeavor. You need give me credit only if space and context make it feasible. —*Nancy*